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ODD LENGTHS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE GUARDED FLAME

VIVIEN

THE RAGGED MESSENGER

FABULOUS FANCIES

THE COUNTESS OF MAYBURY

ODD LENGTHS

BY

W. B. MAXWELL

AUTHOR OF "VIVIEN"

METHUEN & CO.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

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PARABOLICAL

"Oh, no, madam," said the draper to the customer at the clearance sale. "There is nothing against these pieces, except they are what we term odd lengths. They are quite our best materials—you can see for yourself. Just odd lengths."

ODD LENGTHS

THREE—FOUR—FIVE!

NOT a soul in Moulsey—that is, not a soul who knew them—could at first believe that the Chandlers and the Simpsons had quarrelled. That such close allies could seriously fall out seemed too incredible, and yet it was so. Why, the Simpsons and Chandlers had been more like one family than two families! The children had been brought up together: the girls sharing the expenses of a common boat on the river, the boys being inseparable, the mothers like sisters, the one father leaning on the other for support in every emergency of life. Young Tom Chandler was as good as engaged to Edith Simpson; and, of course, Charlie Simpson was meant for Susan Chandler. Had there been an unpleasantness at the bridge table? Throughout the winter they met at each other's houses for a friendly rubber—on Wednesday at the Chandlers', on Saturday at the Simpsons'. Had some terrible discovery as to the financial position of one family been made by the other? If so, which of them was in Queer Street? Had young Thomas made a row about Edith's behaviour at the Rowing Club ball? Were Susan's eyes opened to Charles's method of spending his evenings occasionally? How had it happened? Why had the fast-drawn bonds of years and years been severed in a day, and who was to blame?

No one could answer these questions. No one came

anywhere near the real solution of the mystery. This was the occasion of the irrevocable breach.

Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Chandler were going up to town early one winter morning. Mrs. Simpson was a well-preserved, solid matron. Her hair was beginning to turn grey, and there were signs that she might alarmingly increase in bulk before long; but she was still well-favoured and pleasant to look on, and must have been handsome in her day. Mrs. Chandler had the advantage in years, and was still slim and wiry. Her black hair, if it, too, were turning to the autumnal grey, was not permitted to betray the circumstance. Her dark eyes were as keen and bright as ever they had been, and there were wonderfully few wrinkles about them—considering that she was the mother of grown-up sons and daughters.

They carried small hand-bags, and were dressed comfortably, but far from showily, in matrons' black. They could both be fine enough when finery was demanded—at afternoon parties or on church parade—but at present they were bound for the Metropolis, strictly on business.

There was a drawn look about their mouths, and a haggard, dry light in their eyes, which spoke of sleeplessness, or the fever of suppressed excitement. As a matter of fact, neither of them had slept well the night before. Tossing and turning on uneasy pillows, their brains throbbing with thoughts of the battle planned for the morrow, whenever a light slumber overcame them, they awakened with a start to a horrible idea that it was late in the morning and that they had missed the 7.30 train.

"No one was up when I came away," said Mrs. Chandler, when at last the train was moving. They had been a quarter of an hour too soon on the cold and almost empty platform, and had found a second-class compartment all to themselves. "I made a cup of tea, and snatched a bit of bread-and-butter. Quite enough!"

"I didn't trouble about the kettle," said Mrs. Simpson; "I saved some cold tea and a couple of oatmeal biscuits. I never can eat when I have a day like this before me."

"No. We can get a bun or a scone somewhere, if you should feel faint. I shall be all right till tea-time."

"If all goes well, we shall be there before the shutters are taken down. I shall go straight to the Indian silks and muslins. That's where the rush will be!"

"I must go to the crockery and glass first. I am bound to match our soup plates—the pale green ones, not the best—and pick up some odd numbers of champagne tumblers first. But I shall hurry after you. You might hold any short lengths that you know I should fancy till I can get to you."

"I will try, dear, but you know how frightfully rough they are. I have had pieces torn to shreds in my hand before now."

"I know. They threatened to have a policeman at each of the remnant counters, and I only wish they would. I had my bonnet knocked right over my eyes, just as I was stretching for the sweetest bit of brocade I ever saw—thirteen yards, at eleven and three, ridiculous!—and, when I could see again, the woman behind me had grabbed it. Oh, dear—oh, dear! I have lost my list. I must have left it on the hall table."

At the sight of her friend fumbling and clutching, with tremulous fingers, inside her Russia leather hand-bag, Mrs. Simpson was seized with nervous apprehension, and began to clutch and fumble about her own reticule. It was all right! After turning the contents upside down and sideways without taking anything out, she enjoyed a long-drawn sigh of relief: she had found her pencilled catalogue of requirements.

After that, while the one lady endeavoured to recall the items on the lost leaflet, the other lady read, over and over again, from the paper in her hand; and, above the rattle of the train, nothing was heard from the two pairs of murmuring lips but—"primrose parchment for Emily—the name or initial, if possible—wash-leathers, if they really go cheap. As many dusters as I can find—chipped decanters—soiled table linen.

Some watered silk from the fire—smoked gloves and short-waisted —s”—and other such fragments : unintelligible to male understandings, yet gravid with meaning to all good-managing matrons.

In spite of a friendly warning, Mrs. Simpson would get out of the train at Richmond before it was at rest at the platform, and very nearly sprained her ankle. They had to change across to the Metropolitan Railway here ; and, in the foggy and yellow atmosphere, they met a number of other ladies, mostly dressed in black, and all with hand-bags and haggard, eager eyes. They looked ghost-like and shadowy as they clustered in the fog round the wooden barrier, waiting for the ticket-collector to open the gate and let them through.

The two friends glanced at each other, and Mrs. Simpson whispered ominously, "*It will be a fight !*"

Evidently the Thames Valley was mobilizing strongly for this first day of the campaign. The great man had sent out his pink proclamation, only a week ago, when would-be combatants far and wide were waiting anxiously and wondering what had delayed the expected summons. This was the sale of sales, the annual winter engagement, to which all other battles were as skirmishes or brushes. If you were not in your place when the battlefield was opened, you had very little chance of distinguishing yourself. There were, of course, people who believed in the second day, and even the third day ; who swore that the real pickings were only to be made after the first flight of vultures had been satisfied ; who affirmed that the best things were never scrambled for till the rougher children had been got out of the way ; and pointed triumphantly to glorious prizes snatched from the lucky-bag in the last hours of the last evening. But the vast majority believed that "*first come, first served,*" was truly and indeed the order of the sphinx-like and mysterious general, and that the best fighters carried home the heaviest spoil. The fight was fierce enough, in all conscience, but the owners of the burning eyes had come out to fight, and already, with a sensation that was

by no means unpleasant, they scented the battle afar, and meant to be in the very thick of it.

It was, at any rate, very pleasant to be going into the fray with an old campaigner and a cherished and well-trying comrade, thought the two ladies, as they sat squeezed together in the narrow carriage. How nice it would be coming back, side by side, when all was over ! How they would exchange notes on the return to-night, fortifying and backing up each other in moments of sudden and sickening fear that they had not, after all, come out of it too well !

The fog hung heavier and heavier, and now and then a fog-signal went off like a gun, suggesting the exchanges on the outside of the battlefield. The train would be—was already—late—very late—atrociously and maddeningly late.

Thousands of flaring gas-jets, and hundreds of electric lights—great, pallid moons and orange-coloured, glowing stars—were fighting with the fog in the vast emporium. From all its halls and passages, broad staircases and extensive saloons, there rose an indescribable perfume of leather and carpets, aromatic woods and fabrics from Japan and the spicy East, acrid-smelling prints and chintzes, and the sour skins of furry animals, together with a heavy steam of hot coffee and newly-baked rolls from the spacious refreshment-room ; and this mingled and indescribable perfume was, to the nostrils of the feminine crowds—surging about the counters in every department, thronging, like bees in a swarm or all the football teams of the suburbs in one united scrimmage, round those particular redouts where the besieged assistants were known to be literally *giving* things away—as the breath of war to the proverbial war-horse.

Mrs. Simpson and her friend had been fighting for over an hour, and were both considerably flushed and dishevelled. They had met in the Mantle and Fur department, and were pausing a moment to recover themselves.

In this large and fog-impregnated retreat, with its iron and

glass dome, its wire busts and wicker figures, its tall and stately serving-women, who wore rustling black silk dresses and pyramids of hair on their queen-like heads, its piles of fashionable fur boas, its mountains of jackets and cloaks, and its suspended and tempting mantles, they were sheltered from the fury of the battle that was waging on every side. In here one could appreciate the wonderful hum of voices, and estimate the immense numbers that formed the humming chorus, which sounded strong and ceaseless as the waves of an incoming ocean.

Neither required anything in the mantle line. They were only looking about them, thanks.

"Certainly, madam," said one of the black silk dresses. "This is very soft," she whispered confidentially. "I half think it has been marked down in mistake. At this figure it is considerably less than cost price. They are only from Paris a week ago. I don't think they were meant to be in the sale at all. Forward, please!"

The two old campaigners smiled at one another and sauntered on. It is possible that they were aware of how such managerial mistakes had often been made on previous occasions.

Suddenly Mrs. Simpson stopped, pointing with outstretched hand, as if she had seen a ghost. Following the direction of the pointing hand, Mrs. Chandler instantly saw what had startled her companion. It was a rich blue velvet opera-cloak, trimmed with ostrich and peacock feathers, and lavishly embroidered with jet bugles and beads round the skirt.

"*Three—four—five!*" the elder lady exclaimed breathlessly, and they both advanced—"three—four—five! That *must* be a mistake, or it's *dirt* cheap!"

"Silk lined!" They were picking at it, like birds, by now. "It's so *good* throughout! Cheap at ten guineas I would have said. Look at the velvet! And the feathers! Count the ostrich feathers. Such a bold mixture, but so tasteful. I never liked peacocks before!" and they walked

round and round it; retiring several yards sometimes and then running in from opposite directions, and stooping over the trimming, until the crests of their bonnets jammed, and they had to get up and readjust them.

"Emily," said Mrs. Simpson, all at once, "if I had the money to spare, I'd have it. Three—four—five."

"Louisa! So would I. Only I can't—*daren't* do it. Three—four—five."

Just then a black silk dress bore down upon them, whisked the glorious thing off its wires, hung it about her own graceful shoulders, and sailed up and down in front of a very large woman with a red face and a false fringe. The two friends hung about, fascinated, spell-bound, vibrating in every nerve.

"They say peacock feathers are unlucky, but that's nonsense, of course. Do you think she will take it? You would buy it for Edith, I suppose?"

"No," said Mrs. Simpson, rather shortly, "for myself. But it is no good thinking about it. I *mustn't*."

"For yourself? Oh, I *hardly* think you would like it for yourself. This blue is rather trying for anybody who hasn't the misfortune to be thin, and it *is* cut so very spare," said Mrs. Chandler, giving the cloak a curious sort of tweak as the shop-girl returned.

"Do you think so?" said the elder lady, doubtfully. "They can alter anything here, you know. But it *is* bright, very bright. No, you are right, I *won't* like it. Besides, I do believe peacock feathers are unlucky—even as few as those. No, it won't do. It would not suit me, even if I could afford it, which I can't."

The girl had replaced the cloak on the wired outline of feminine beauty and grace, and Mrs. Chandler was stooping over its lower folds. Only the back of her neck and her bonnet, still slightly on one side, could be seen as she spoke.

"In that case, if you have made up your mind against it, I really think, if you'll promise to back me up, I will make he plunge and buy it myself."

"I certainly will not back you up," said Mrs. Simpson, surprised into unbecoming loudness of voice; and the back of Mrs. Chandler's neck was suffused with a guilty blush.

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because if either of us buys it, *I* will buy it. *I* found it, and it is mine by right if I want it. This is not like you, Emily. You try to put me off it, and frighten me simply because you want it for yourself. That is deceitful of you."

Of course Mrs. Chandler declared that deceit was, as ever, foreign to her nature. If her friend claimed her right and took it, so be it. If she felt that it would suit her; that with her splendid and luxuriant figure she could carry off the blueness and the sparseness together, and face a Moulsey concert audience without any inward misgiving, it was not for Mrs. Chandler to oppose her, whatever the force of her own opinion. But if she did not care to risk the purchase, then Mrs. Chandler would. That was fair enough.

But Mrs. Simpson was utterly unreasonable. It was hers, as between the two, by right of finding, whether she choose to buy it or not. In any case her friend must not, should not, buy it. And so the animated discussion went on, and the humming chorus all round waxed stronger and stronger in volume.

"I call on you as a friend to leave it alone, Emily," the discoverer said at last. "It would be too mean and too unlike you to cut me out in that way."

"Is not that the dog in the manger?" said Mrs. Chandler, very heatedly. "At any moment somebody may come in and snap it up before our faces—while you stand talking such nonsense. It would suit me, and you would look odious in it."

"Your rudeness and unkindness push me over the brink, Emily," said Mrs. Simpson, solemnly. "*I will* buy it. There shall be no dog in the manger about it. Three—four—five."

Then Mrs. Chandler changed her front. She implored her friend to forget her thoughtless words. She should *not* go

over the brink. It would not suit her one little bit, and she should *not* burden herself with a white elephant at three—four—five. Neither of them would buy it, since neither of them could really afford it. They would leave it there for the next happy discoverer who should come that way.

But Mrs. Simpson was now resolute to go over the brink, and required a lot of management before she consented to be led away from temptation—away from this soft and enervating shelter, back into the raging centre of the battle.

“I could not have believed she would behave like that, or say such rude things. I *know* I could carry it off all right !” thought Mrs. Simpson, as she snatched and pushed and elbowed, in front of the piles of rainbow-tinted note-paper in the Stationery department.

“Odious selfishness ! It would just suit me. That shop-girl and I were a perfect match in height and everything, and *she* looked splendid in it. It would make Louisa look a simple tub—nothing else !” thought Mrs. Chandler, very wrathfully, as, with snake-like undulations and rushes, she approached an immense glove tray.

Ten minutes later a lady in black was hurrying down the staircase that leads from Ladies’ and Infants’ Underlinen to Cloaks, Capes, and Furs, while another lady in black was advancing through the great door of Boots, Shoes, and Slippers towards the same point. They met in the middle of the carpeted floor, one on each side of the blue velvet cloak. Like the two elders in the apocryphal story, they had parted company under some idle pretence, and, taking circuitous routes, had returned to the object of attraction and temptation.

“I came back just to have one more peep at it,” said Mrs. Simpson, in confusion. “If only to see whether it was gone yet.”

“And I came because I knew you were not to be trusted, and to save you from folly,” said Mrs. Chandler, putting a bold face upon the doubtful situation.

“Three—four—five !” Mrs. Simpson murmured to herself,

as once more she permitted herself to be led away. "*Dirt cheap!* It is madness leaving it;" and she showed signs of breaking away and returning.

"If it is madness to leave it, and it doesn't suit you, why not let me have it?" said Mrs. Chandler, almost dragging her along. "Come—come—you are forgetting everything. Does Mr. Simpson wear flannel next his skin? Because I have seen some——"

"Giving them away? Show me where they are."

Then the two ladies went on with the business that had brought them to London. They struggled and bought and carried away their purchases, for fear other strugglers should get possession of them out of the shop people's hands, from counter to counter, from department to department. But in all their struggles, amid the confused sea of bonnets, in the roar of the assembled voices—for, though nobody meant to raise her voice, the general effect was in certain departments an angry roar—they never felt their minds free from one thought. Neither of them would lose sight of the other again until they were both safe in the moving train.

They could *not* trust each other. You see, the friendship of years is a very real thing, and it is absurd to sneer at the feminine notion of honour; but there are limits to everything. The soldier who will succour and stay with his comrade beneath the hail of the enemy's bullets, will cheat him out of his share of the plunder of a hen-roost. There is no stauncher or more loyal friendship than that of two women of mature years, between whom no rivalry of love is ever likely to come. They will do practically anything in the world for each other; but, in the peculiar and inexplicable fever of a draper's winter sale, *their* limits are reached, and treachery is absolutely certain to be practised.

Nobody knew this better than Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Chandler. Had there been no obvious cause for suspicion of each other, it would have naturally occurred to both to keep a watchful eye. But now, after what had happened—the

first discussion, the meeting, and the angry words—a close guard was indeed necessary.

It occurred to Mrs. Simpson that if only Mrs. Chandler would get entangled or held in some distant portion of the vast building, she could then safely leave her friend for a brief space; but the lady gave her no such chance of freedom. Doubtless she, too, was angry at having to keep guard, and would also have been glad of a short relief.

“I am only running up to the Drugs. Don’t trouble to come. I will find you here when I come down,” Mrs. Simpson would say, when she fancied the opportunity had arrived.

“One instant, and I will come too,” and Mrs. Chandler would clutch her by the arm or hand-bag. “Does this match that, or that match this best?”

They met friends or acquaintances, of course, here and there, in the press of the throng, but a hurried nod sufficed for recognition and they would press and push, shoulder to shoulder, in the storming of some strongly-defended place, without exchanging a single word. Sometimes, in smoking-rooms and other haunts of men, one hears dark insinuations as to the hours spent by ladies in shopping. One hears veiled allusions to the convenience of the great metropolitan bazaars for frivolous appointments or the furtherance of reprehensible flirtations. No one who had ever been at one of the great winter sales would make such ridiculous suggestions, or hint that the fair sex there congregated were bent on anything but business. In all the multitude of buyers there was never a male to be seen, except the perspiring shop-walkers (with the red rosettes), the tails of whose elegant frock-coats were in constant danger of being pulled off by the eager pluckings that claimed attention on every side.

The afternoon was wearing on, the fog was creeping in like heavy smoke, the heat was tropical, and still the battle raged. The two friends were hot and dusty, dishevelled as to headgear, and, like pack-horses, burdened with parcels. Their indomitable courage still sustained them. They were

unconscious of bodily fatigue, though their legs nearly failed them, and their feet were burning. They had eaten nothing since the morning—not even the suggested bun or scone—and yet felt no hunger, though they were yawning woefully from sheer emptiness. They were fighting, shoulder to shoulder, in the *mêlée* among the odd lengths of Chinese cretonnes and Japanese muslins, when the opportunity that Mrs. Simpson had been looking for came.

"Pardon me; I have already selected that," said Mrs. Chandler, firmly, to a lady who had taken possession of the other end of a long strip of flowery curtain.

"No, that you didn't. Let go, if you please, at once," said the lady, with spirit.

"Don't think of letting go," said one of the lady's friends. "Where's the shop-walker?"

"Hold it! hold it!" cried Mrs. Simpson. "I will run for the shop-walker. This belongs to my friend, madam. Let go at once!" and she darted away.

Her keen eye had discovered an ally in the crowd, not two yards off. It was a Mrs. Rogers, a humble friend—almost a hanger-on—of the Simpson household. While her companion was still struggling with the unknown foe over the highly desirable length of stuff so insolently attacked, Mrs. Simpson got in touch with Mrs. Rogers, opened her bag, gave her money, and, with surprising rapidity, instructed her.

"Three—four—five, in large figures. You can't mistake it. Peacock's and ostrich's. Go as fast as you can. To be sent to my address. Don't delay—like a good creature."

The ally hurried off, and Mrs. Simpson pounced on a rosetted assistant and returned to her friend, to find the delicate Oriental fabric hanging in shreds and tatters in her hand, and the enemy vanished.

The shop-walker made nothing of the incident (they always had a grand style at this famous house), twirled the stuff—a remnant indeed now—into a bundle, and threw it down behind the counter.

"Don't mention it, my dear madam. We are accustomed to considerable eagerness and occasional accidents. Pass along, ladies ! Pass along, if you please, ladies !" and he pointed over their heads to a great, staring proclamation of the proprietor—the mysterious and venerated general—warning non-combatants not to loiter on the field of action.

There was a light of triumph in Mrs. Simpson's haggard eyes as they at last found seats in the tea-room ; but Mrs. Chandler did not notice it. She was utterly worn out with the double duty of fighting for herself and guarding her friend, and had renounced all idea of getting away from her. It was not till they rested their aching limbs on the cane chairs that they knew they were dead beat, and nearly fainting from hunger.

Their temples throbbed, and the inside of their heads seemed to be opening and shutting with a bang every second, as the train bore them homeward out of the fog and turmoil of the vast town—out into the purer air of the river valley. It had been a grand day, a memorable day, a never-to-be-forgotten battle ; and, while the rhythmical rattle of the wheels seemed to be repeating, "*Three—four—five, three—four—five, three—four—five,*" with the emphasis on the first number, Mrs. Simpson told herself that she had triumphed.

What was Mrs. Chandler thinking about, and what did the rattle of the wheels appear to her to say, while she sat with closed eyes, pretending to sleep ? Were the wheels whispering, "*Three—four—five,*" to her also ? If so, she never alluded to those tempting numbers in the few scraps of conversation that passed between the two worn-out comrades-in-arms.

BUT, she went up to town next morning by the same 7.30 train, *all by herself*, without a word of explanation to anybody, and returned, before one o'clock, with a brown-paper parcel in her hand.

Less than a week after this, Mrs. Simpson and Mrs.

Chandler both went to the evening performance of the Moulsey and Hampton Vagrant Histrions. Each hoped against hope, as she entered the hall, that the other would not be there. Each wore a blue velvet opera cloak with a collar of mixed ostrich and peacock feathers. They both flushed crimson, and then turned deadly pale as they met in the reserved seats, but they did not speak, though the two husbands talked across them with boisterous cordiality. They both understood, even in their first surprise, that each had been treacherous to the other, and realized that in all probability the supply of those rich blue cloaks at three—four—five would not fail until the demand for them ceased.

One would have thought no solution of the little difficulty as to who should possess the object of their admiration could have been happier. Each of them had got what each wanted, without robbing her old friend. But they did not see the matter in this light. Everybody noticed the coldness at the performance; and the open and complete breach—the absolute severance of every old tie, the irrevocable separation of the two entire families, who were compelled to obey their commanders—immediately followed. You see, neither Mrs. Simpson nor Mrs. Chandler could forget that her friend had tried to deceive her, that she had tried to deceive her friend, and that she had deceived herself.

RIPE

I

LADY EDITH was the daughter of Lord and Lady Lynton, but she was the wife of Mr. John Upton. She was the wife of a middle-aged stockbroker; she lived for the most part of the year in the suburbs; and yet she was distinctly a personage. She was a greater personage by being outside London than if she had always stayed in it. People liked to come down to Limes Court, and her garden-parties were events. You would read in the morning paper, under *To-day's Arrangements*: "Lady Edith Upton's third garden-party at Kingston;" and you would long to be going. And in fact it was pleasant enough—if you went.

All this was before the ugly days of motor-cars and electric trams, when the suburbs were unpolluted; but it was not before the days of the speculative builder. As you drove down, it was pitiful to see his brutal, devastating hand at work. From behind each solid red-brick wall his hideous board would rise: "Building Estate. Ripe for Development," etc. One can picture the rest. Down go the dear old trees; the stately Georgian house stands bare and desolate; then a row of shops line out in front, but still you may catch a glimpse of the cornice or portico for a little while. Then down goes the old house itself, and that is the end of Perceval Park or Aumale House: a town of trumpery villas, streets, parades, terraces of jerry-built, rough-cast, and patent-tile abomination, has rolled over and obliterated the last traces of the home of the famous political lord, the great chancellor, or the king in exile.

Limes Court was safe, of course, and, by reason of the

universal destruction, becoming every year more precious and more wonderful.

As you drove in through stone-pillared gates, you were at once hundreds of miles away from the ugly, rolling town. You were deep in the heart of wooded England; you were being taken to visit the lord-lieutenant of the county. There were some of his dwarf Jerseys; there was his thatched tea-cottage; there was the lane that led you to the home-farm.

The house itself was quietly splendid, reposefully magnificent. With the crowd of arrivals, you drifted through the rooms and came out on the terrace—into the thick of Lady Edith's third or fourth garden-party as the case might be, and, if partial to garden-parties, were glad you had been asked and glad you had been able to come.

Lady Edith, tall, handsome, composedly gracious, was on the terrace, receiving her guests; a Guards band was playing classical and popular music in alternate numbers; behind the great windows of the long orangery there were tea and strawberries on small round tables, and ices and sandwiches, and champagne plain in bottles and full of odd things in jugs, being lavishly supplied by many servants at buffets.

And all over the wide lawns, walking in shade and in sunlight, sauntering away through the meadows towards the thatched cottage, to look at the cows in their fields, the flowers in their beds, the fish in their ponds—all over the place were Lady Edith's interesting, well-dressed, highly distinguished guests.

Here were wise people, pretty people well worth looking at. Here were ambassadors, actors; actresses—if over forty and *very* famous—or French, when no questions were asked; all the lords and ladies who had nothing to do that afternoon; but very few people from the City—just a few. Here, to admire also, was the famous vista of the limes with the tower of Kingston Church—and never a roof in sight, look where you would. Mingling with the music of the Guards band, a babble of admiration floated on the summer air:

"Too charmin' for words."

"Quite."

"So well kept up, isn't it?"

"Exactly. Just what I was going to say. Nothing spared to make it perfect. Really idyllic—on a day like this."

Often the guests spoke of the City-made wealth by which all this pleasant and animated scene was rendered possible. Often, as to-day, they discussed the present and future market value of Lady Edith's idyllic surroundings.

"I happen to know something about these matters," said a white-haired old boy. "As trustee—ye know—for young Boscastle, I saw the working of the whole thing."

He was with another white-haired old fellow and two most solid dowagers; and as they walked very slowly in the sunlight, he told them of how he and his co-trustees had been forced to break up the Coombe-Mallard estate for building purposes; of how dear old Lady Boscastle had fought against the cruel necessity; and of how completely reconciled her ladyship had been when the money began to come tumbling in—both by way of ground rents and purchase.

"These speculating builders, agents, and that sort of fellow came buzzing about our ears like so many flies—a swarm of 'em, ye know, bidding against each other, before we'd made up our minds what the dickens we were to do with the place."

"I remember it," said one of the solid dowagers. "Very charmin' place it was."

"Wasn't it? But, ye know—really unknown to us, it had been steadily growing in value—for building. But *they* knew—those agent fellows." And the old boy laughed.

"Keen as mustard," said the other old boy. "I know 'em."

"They have an instinct that seems to tell 'em when their chance is coming. I called 'em flies, but our solicitors, who carried through the whole thing for us—very good firm—Bridgenorths—they said these regular agent fellows are more

like vultures. Hovering—don't ye know—whenever there's death and disaster in the air."

"How horrid!" said the heavier of the two dowagers. "Shall we look for chairs? I believe we should find a seat in the orangery—and some tea."

"Capital idea!" said the white-haired cavaliers.

But, perhaps as these two fine old boys were less anxious for tea than the ladies, they somehow got lost in the crowd behind the orangery windows, and, no doubt regretfully, here went off escort-duty. However, stout Mary Lady Crowland and stouter Frances Lady Ambleside obtained refreshment in great comfort at a table all to themselves, and, indeed, found another cavalier in an obliging stranger, who sent a servant to bring them tea, and himself carried them strawberries-and-cream, etc.

He was a grave, kind man, who made nothing of this trouble, and to whom both Mary and Frances were smilingly grateful for the slight assistance he offered.

"Too kind of you, I'm sure! So pleasant here, isn't it?"

Talking still of the charms of Limes Court, while they dipped the fresh, sound strawberries in the thick, rich cream, the two good dowagers came soon to speak of the man who worked all day in the City to make the strawberries grow firm and the cows yield generous milk—of their host, who counted for nothing in Lady Edith's garden-parties.

But, when they spoke of *him*, the attentive stranger disappeared.

"Er—Frances, could that friendly creature have been our host himself?"

"Upon my word, Mary, I think it must have been! Yes; I am sure it is. I see him over there, speaking to the servants."

Really, he counted for very little in Lady Edith's garden-parties; really, perhaps, he counted for very little more in Lady Edith's life.

II

THEY had been married ten years, and he was much older than she—a grey, self-repressed man, strong of feature and strong of frame, dressing soberly, sober, almost solemn of aspect until you came to know him well : and no one seemed to do that. A man perhaps envied by many, but walking alone in a crowd—envied because of his success, but perhaps always carrying with him the sense of failure. No children. That was a heavy disappointment. That, perhaps, was the thought which puckered his forehead and slackened the strong line of his lips when he sat by himself sometimes, in his little Mayfair house or his big City office.

He had been wonderfully successful. Once he was John Upton the clerk ; then he was John Upton the principal partner. The firm was Meredith, George and Co., but he was the firm itself now—of Lombard Street ; a solid, respectable house—brokers to the United Bank ; doing Government business—Colonial Government business. No speculation. No need to speculate.

When he fell desperately in love with Lady Edith, it was all easy going for him. He won Lord and Lady Lynton immediately, and henceforth it was a triple attack upon the well-guarded heart. Lady Edith did not surrender without adequate and sufficiently maintained defence. There was no one else—Lady Edith told her mamma that she was quite sure of this. But, after all, a stockbroker was—a stockbroker. If Lady Edith had been weaving girlish dreams, she may have felt that in all her dreams she had never dreamt of a stockbroker.

“My wish,” said mamma, “is *not* to influence you either way. It is for you to decide. But there is *one* consideration that—other things being equal—we ought not to lose sight of. He is certainly very much in love with you ; and he has heaps and heaps of money.”

Money and love. He offered her both : all that he had of either. And he never asked her which she had chosen when by saying Yes she agreed to make all parties happy.

Heaps of money, yet a hitch—a slight hitch—about tying it all up. But he bought Limes Court, and settled it upon his wife absolutely ; and with this the Lyntons were finally contented. As Mr. Upton explained, the golden heaps were in the business itself, and could not be taken out of the business. A man does not rise from a clerk's desk, and buy out and pension off partner after partner until he becomes lord and master of the whole concern, and yet keep his capital liquid—all in banknotes, bonds to bearer, etc.—in readiness to hand over to a father-in-law's solicitors. Lord Lynton might measure, and was invited to measure, the depth and width of the golden stream that annually flowed from the business ; and with this measurement the properly careful parent was obliged to be satisfied. Lord Lynton himself was settling on his loved child exactly two hundred per annum. Mr. Upton had asked for the lady, and nothing more. He never suggested that this provision was not magnificent, but, as a business man, he naturally stated the precise sum whenever the provision was mentioned. Perhaps the repetition of the amount gradually made his lordship easier to deal with, and caused him to forgo his original plan of standing out for "big money."

"You'll get a London house, of course," said Lord Lynton, still feebly bargaining. "You won't expect Edie to stick down at Kingston all through the year."

"I have a London house," said Mr. Upton, "in South Audley Street."

His lordship was aware of this fact, but the house was a very small one, and he declared it to be "insufficient," and "a bandbox."

"All right, you know, for a bachelor, but really——"

"If Edith doesn't find it big enough, we can get a bigger house later. But there's twelve years of the lease to run."

Mr. Upton further reminded Lord Lynton that it was

Edith, and not he, who had taken a fancy to Limes Court, and desired to live outside London.

"It is solely to please Edith that I am buying it," he said. "I have only one wish in life—to make her happy."

"I am sure that's so," said his lordship, "but she mayn't be the best judge of what *will* make her happy."

"If her happiness is to be found in a big London house," said Mr. Upton, "we will look for it there—later on. But we'll carry out the present arrangement first, if you don't mind. You may trust me to do my best."

"All right," said my lord, rather glumly, as though in truth thinking that it was all wrong.

Then with all due pomp and ceremony Mr. John Upton and the Lady Edith Parracombe, third daughter of the Earl and Countess of Lynton, were made one.

She was a good wife from the first; but, slowly as the years passed, they drifted apart, until one might almost say they were two again. Between them there were no quarrels, wranglings, or bickerings; but it seemed that if there was nothing to push them asunder, there was nothing to hold them together. She was the person who spent the money; he was the man who made the money; and they did not, after the opening of their married life, ever exchange confidences as to the happiness or weariness which each derived from the process.

Lady Edith was not interested in business matters—did not know if the place in Lombard Street was a house or a flat; had never felt the least curiosity to go and have a look at it.

"I am profoundly ignorant," she told her women friends, "and my husband always leaves his business behind him—forgets it after office hours."

"But how nice!" said one of the friends. "What a blessing that must be! You are luckier than poor Angela Dunford. She says that ever since Bertie went into the City he thinks of nothing else. He moans and groans in his sleep, dreaming that all his silly stocks and shares are going up or down—whichever he doesn't want them to do."

Lady Edith was not fond of fishing. She was a good wife, but not the sort of wife to flounder into running water with a landing-net, and be photographed, making a pretty family picture for the illustrated papers : Husband, wife, and salmon. Thus in August and September days, when stockbrokers make holiday, Mr. Upton might be looked for in Ireland or Norway, while Lady Edith could be seen by all the world at Homburg, Carlsbad, or Dinard.

She was a good wife—from a social point of view, a perfect wife. She had made his name as well known in polite society as it was in business circles. “Upton ! What Upton ? Do you mean Lady Edith’s husband ?” Whether as hostess at little winter dinners in South Audley Street, or as hostess at the big summer parties at Kingston, she deserved all praise. She did not shirk those wifely duties which society cannot observe, though it can and often does talk about. When Mr. Upton once was ill in bed, Lady Edith came up from Kingston, sat by his bedside, read aloud to him in calm, even tones till he got up again. What that she did not give him should a reasonable man ask for ?

Mr. Upton asked for nothing—at least, asked only once something in the nature of a favour ; and then it was refused to him.

Lady Edith was so good a wife that naturally, in spite of her good looks, the tongue of scandal was powerless to harm her. Really, you could not see her talking to a man—alone with a man, in a box at the opera, in her victoria in Hyde Park, at a German spa, on the top of a mountain, anywhere—without understanding that, as the common phrase runs, there was nothing in it, and that you had better not waste breath in starting a tale which all the wind in your body would never keep going. She was, in fact, an inveterately virtuous woman, by feeling and temperament as well as by training and inculcated tradition, and she possessed what is perhaps a rare power. She was not only virtuous : she could make all the world believe the fact implicitly.

But she had men friends as well as women friends. If you saw the man in the victoria one day, you would very likely see him there the next day ; also in the opera-box—for a little while the same man always. It was simply the modern fashion. Nothing—absolutely nothing in it.

Once it was an ex-guardsman, who was a musical genius. He composed reveries, nocturnes, what not, and played them himself on the piano—for the first time—to Lady Edith. His talent had been spurned in the regiment. He was always included in week-end parties at Limes Court. Mr. Upton, coming down on Saturday afternoon, would find him at the piano, playing assiduously. And Lady Edith, as her husband came gently into the pretty room, would raise a finger warningly—give him a gracious, smiling, but serious warning not to interrupt the music. The young man always went on playing ; and when he had finished his nocturne, or whatever it was, he always politely asked what Mr. Upton thought of it.

Once it was a brilliant and well-connected young man who wrote plays, that were only acted on Sunday evenings by some peculiar and influential society of which Lady Edith was a member. He re-wrote his plays perpetually, and he read—for the first time—all his new versions to Lady Edith. But he never went on reading when Mr. Upton came into the room. He stopped at once ; folded his typewritten copy ; bit his moustache discontentedly ; almost glared at his host, as who should say : “ What the deuce are you doing here—disturbing people ? Why don’t you go back to the City, and attend to your own business ? ”

Then it was an older man ; and then Mr. Upton asked his favour, in the pretty morning-room at Limes Court.

“ Edith, I don’t care about your Mr. What’s-his-name.”

“ Are you speaking of Gerald Gordon ? ”

“ Yes. I don’t care about him.”

“ Don’t you ? ” said Lady Edith very coldly. “ You scarcely know him. You have not seen him more than half a dozen times.”

"I have seen him oftener than I want to. Edith, oblige me—humour my whim. Don't ask him here; and don't let people see you about together any more."

But then Lady Edith protested against what she seemed to consider an unwarranted interference with her freedom in selecting her own friends. She protested coldly, calmly, dispassionately.

"You say 'Oblige me;' but you speak as though you were issuing an order. Of course I shall obey you—whatever I may think."

This was at the end of the protest—very coldly and calmly. Mr. Upton, standing by the marble hearth, had picked up a delicate Dresden figure and was examining it as though he had never seen it before and did not remember how much money he had paid for it. He too was quite calm: grey, grave, and strong, a quiet, self-repressed man who certainly conveyed the impression that he would be obeyed if he did issue an order, not at all the sort of man to be set at naught by any Mr. Gerald Gordon.

"Edith, how can you talk like that?"

"You compel me to speak plainly. You don't seem to understand that what you have said to me is—almost—an insult."

"Edith!" And Mr. Upton put down the china shepherdess, and stretched out his hand, as though inviting his wife to come across the room and clasp it. "Edith!"

But his wife did not avail herself of the invitation.

"I want to know exactly what you mean. Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Then your request is ridiculous."

"I don't think so. I trust you—*absolutely*; but there are appearances."

"Appearances! I think I should be the best judge as to appearances."

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Upton; and that was the end of it all.

Perhaps he felt that he had no solid ground to stand on. He could not say: "I am speaking to you as Jack's father," etc., etc.

Lady Edith remained quite unruffled. It took much to ruffle Lady Edith.

III

BUT she was perceptibly ruffled at last. The ruffling began with something that she really might have supported as a most trifling annoyance. It was only an impertinent letter from a person of no consequence—just a vulgar, pushing little tradesman who called himself an estate-agent. The letter made her face flush from indignation.

"Should you be desirous of selling Limes Court," said Mr. Vince, of the New Parade, Kingston-on-Thames, "we shall be happy to assist you in the matter. We may say that we have long considered this land ripe for building, and we anticipate little difficulty in developing it both expeditiously and advantageously."

Sell Limes Court! Cut up and utterly destroy her beautiful home—the place that she had made famous, the place upon which she had lavished her art and care together with her husband's money, the place that she loved! Was ever such an impertinent suggestion made by an impudent agent questing for his odious work?

She was so angry that she spoiled three sheets of her thick, Limes Court paper before she satisfied herself by attaining duly crushing terms for her brief third-person reply to vulgar Mr. Vince.

"We note," said Mr. Vince, acknowledging his setback, "that you do not at present contemplate offering Limes Court for sale, or yourself developing it as a building estate, although, as experts, we have no hesitation in assuring you that it is thoroughly ripe for this purpose. Should you at any time

feel disposed to go into the matter again, we shall be most happy to put our services at your disposal."

Lady Edith's hand shook as she tore up this second consummately impudent communication. Really, she was unreasonably angry. But, although the wife of a business man, she knew so little of business that she could make no allowance for the necessity which compels business men, big and little, to be ever seeking business. In her opinion it would have been grossly impertinent to write to her, even if the preposterous notion that she would ever sell her property had been sober fact. It was true that the property belonged to her, and not to her husband; but that was a purely private arrangement. No Mr. Vince had any right to this knowledge, or any excuse for acting on it. Had Mr. Vince been justified in writing to anybody, he should have written to her husband; but, of course, he should not have written to anybody.

She was driving, in a day or two, by the river, and then past the ugly new shops called the New Parade. She looked, with haughty contempt, at the bill-decorated front-windows of Mr. Vince's office: "Building Land. Ripe for Development. Grenville House Estate," etc., etc. In imagination she saw such a bill prepared for the sacred and inviolate Limes; and again indignation brought a faint flush to her pale cheeks.

The flush deepened presently. Her carriage had passed the estate-agent's, and then had been stopped abruptly by an obstruction in the road. A builder's waggon, laden with scaffold-poles, blocked the road from pavement to pavement; and the poor horses were helplessly straining to pull it round and move on with it.

"My lady—your ladyship—a thousand pardons—but if I may have a word with you——"

The impudent, red-haired little man had come running from his office, and now stood bowing by the carriage-step.

"I am Mr. Vince. We have been in correspondence, as you know, and I could not let the opportunity slip."

The stupid footman, thinking that his mistress enjoyed the conversation and intended to prolong it, would have got down to stand by Mr. Vince at the carriage-wheel ; but her ladyship told him to remain where he was.

"Turn," she said to the coachman, "and drive back to the river."

"A personal interview," said Mr. Vince, eagerly, "often clears up any little misunderstanding."

"There can be no misunderstanding," said Lady Edith. "You have received a reply to your inquiry."

"Yes ; but," said Mr. Vince, still close to the step, as the coachman turned his horses, "if you would permit me to come up to the Court any morning. I do assure you there never was a time when things were brisker." And, as the carriage drove away, his ugly, vulgar words followed her : "Ripe—development—top of the market," etc.

As she drove in through the stone-pillared gates, and looked first on one side, then on the other, she felt the warm blood rising to her face again.

The stately trees were throwing long shadows across the rich meadows ; at a white gate the cows had clustered, waiting for their servants, the farm-hands, to come and conduct them to the sheds and milk them ; beyond the field was blazing colour, red and mauve rhododendrons in their full June glory ; through masses of foliage one caught a glimpse of stone balustrades and glittering water. Presently, beneath the graceful branches of her sweet-smelling limes, the house itself came into view, massive, splendid, imposing, yet with the pretty, home-like touches that so pleased the garden-party visitors when they saw it for the first time. Green shutters to white-framed windows, red-and-white flowers in the tiled window-boxes, red-and-white blinds to make the house seem sleeping while the sun shone upon it.

Sell it ! Take the top of the market for the beautiful home which she had made all her care, to which she had given all her love for ten long years ! Lady Edith was, perhaps,

more angry than she had ever been as she thought of the insolent overtures of the eager, red-haired man.

On a table in the square hall there were letters, and some visiting-cards left by people who had called in the course of their afternoon drives—people of more or less importance from big houses at Wimbledon, Esher, and Hampton, not ordinary suburb-dwellers. One card the butler had separated from the rest, and laid on the corner of the ebony table, and now he glanced at it doubtfully.

“A person, my lady, who was very particular to see you. I ask him if he was expected by you, my lady, but he said no, only he would be glad if you could spare him a minute, as it was important.”

Lady Edith looked down at the isolated card, and started :

“Mr. Robert Miller, Miller and Company, Auctioneers and Estate Agents, St. James’s Street.”

“I cannot see this person.”

“No, my lady ; I told him I was sure you would not—without he had come by appointment. But he said he’d wait.”

“Is he here now ?”

“No, my lady. He ask permission to walk round the place.”

“You should not have given him permission.”

“I didn’t, my lady. I told him I couldn’t take it on myself to say he might—that is, *inside* ; but of course he was free to walk round the outside in the public road, and he said he’d go and do so, and call again on the chance.”

“That was quite right, Reynolds. If he calls again, tell him I cannot see him.”

Then Lady Edith picked up her letters, and went into her own room to read them while the footmen brought the tea-things.

One letter was from a hospital, appealing for a donation ; one was from a friend, asking for an invitation to the next garden-party for a dear girl who would then be staying with her ; and one was from the great Pall Mall firm of estate-agents.

"With a view," said the Pall Mall firm, "to the sale by private treaty of Limes Court and the surrounding ripe building estate, we shall esteem it a favour if you will allow us to place the same upon our register."

Lady Edith, after reading her letter, walked about the room with clenched hands.

Slander had been powerless to touch her; scandal had been forced to pass her by; but now, plainly, rumour was busy with her name. Never having been talked about by common people, she hated to think that they were talking of her now. But this certainly was happening. It could not be chance—that all these agents should of a sudden come like a swarm of flies buzzing about her fragrant limes. Some one had spread a report that she wanted to sell her limes, her shaded paths, her velvet lawns, and glittering pools. Some garden-party guest, eating her strawberries but bursting with envy at the sight of so much splendid peace and well-ordered beauty, had done this thing to humiliate her, to annoy her. Perhaps there had been a paragraph in the newspapers: the lie put into public print by the secret enemy.

It was some time before Lady Edith could compose herself; but at last she succeeded in recovering a calmly contemptuous state of mind again. What did it matter, really? If the annoyance continued, perhaps it would be well to get her husband to deal with it—from Lombard Street. He could have newspapers searched, and, if any impertinence were discovered, he could instruct people to get injunctions, and so forth. He would know what to do and how to do it. If the annoyance continued, it would then become a matter of business—something that had passed from her department into his.

Next morning there were two letters from London agents—a Maddox Street firm and a Holborn firm—and another letter from the uncrushed Mr. Vince.

"Re Limes Court," wrote Mr. Vince: "We regret troubling you in this matter again, but, hearing that rival

firms are moving, we do earnestly beg that, should you ultimately decide to treat, you will in fairness remember that we were the first firm to approach you in this important matter."

Then Lady Edith determined that, on the next occasion they happened to meet, she would request her husband to deal with the annoyance.

IV

ON this glorious June day Lady Edith felt languid and weary. It was a day on which the least effort tired one. She had breakfast in the open air, at the shaded end of the terrace; and she sat for a long time after the servants had carried away the breakfast-table, shirking the duties that lay before her.

This morning she must grant interviews to the man who managed the farm for her, to the man from the waterworks who was to investigate the cause of the lessened pressure at the third fountain, to the head gardener and the man who was to be sent from the nurseries on Kingston Hill to advise as to the new flower-beds—a heavy morning's work for the mistress of Limes Court.

Then, after lunch, a woman friend was coming to spend a long afternoon and remain to dinner. Lady Edith very nearly made up her mind to send a telegram to Roehampton asking the friend not to come.

She and this Angela Dunford were very old friends, who had seen little of each other in late years. They had been girls together, neighbours in Devonshire. Then Angela had married her Bertie. Captain Bertie was in a smart cavalry regiment, and he had carried his bride into the exile that suddenly befell the dashing corps. From far-off India, Angela wrote immense letters to her dear playmate Edith, and on thin paper and with crossed lines deplored her banishment at such great length that perhaps Edith grew tired of reading

about it, and omitted to reply by return mail as requested. Then the gallant Bertie came into a fortune, left the regiment, hastened home, and promptly lost the fortune by unlucky investments. Then, thinking he had learnt all about the City while achieving his disaster, Bertie became a regular City man ; and, as Angela said, moaned in his sleep while he dreamed of his stocks and shares. Really, the poor man did very well in the City, and contrived to keep an intact roof to shelter his loving wife and his noisy youngsters.

The two friends met now on rare occasions, but exile and the years had broken the old bond. Angela was handsome still, but to Edith's critical eye all the old charm and elegance were gone. She had somehow become a middle-class matron, thinking of nothing but her husband and her children, and only with apparent difficulty talking of anything else. She came to the garden-parties by train, and she brought with her two little boys in white sailor-suits ; and it used to be this sort of thing :

"Good-bye, Edith dear. Jack, Tom, thank Lady Edith for a happy afternoon. I hope you didn't mind my bringing them."

"Mind ? Good-bye, Angela. Really, we have not had a word together."

"No, Edith. Do let me come down one day when you are quite alone."

"Oh, but *do*."

"And, of course, if you wouldn't mind my bringing those two imps, they'd simply love it."

For auld lang syne it would not do to put off poor Angela. In all the years she had never come with her brats for the quiet day. But now she had suddenly invited herself, without the children. She was staying at Roehampton, and her friends would lend her a carriage.

"I am longing to see you," said Angela. "I want to be all alone with you, as we used to be in the old times, when we were both happy girls, with nothing in all the wide world to worry or distress us."

Thus wrote sentimental and rather boring Angela ; and, receiving no telegram to withdraw the consent to her friendly visit, she duly arrived on this oppressively warm afternoon.

"Oh, Edith dear, I am so glad to be with you." And she kissed her hostess affectionately.

Edith Upton strolled about the lovely gardens with the visitor ; showed the visitor the dwarf magnolias and the giant peonies, the water-lilies with the gold-fish darting beneath the broad leaves in the lowest of the stone-walled ponds, the tower of the church at the end of the famous vista, and the upper terrace and the house as seen from the marble seat in the roseroy : in a word, showed the visitor all the pretty things that she, the hostess, was never tired of looking at.

But the visitor to-day seemed to see without seeing. Her thoughts seemed far away, and the only serious comment she made was something that sounded like disparagement.

"It is wonderful," said Mrs. Dunford. "So near London—you wouldn't guess. But you don't have the country air. Personally, I could be happy in a cottage—in the country—if only it was the real country."

"The peaches ripen here," said Lady Edith, very seriously. "People say the London smoke extends to Staines now, but I always think peaches are the test. Would you care to go through the houses ? I am proud of my orchard-houses."

"Do you know, I'd rather sit down now," said the visitor. "It *is* so hot, isn't it ?" And, as they strolled up to the terrace, again she spoke thoughtfully.

"Edith, I notice you say about everything 'my,' not 'our.' The whole place is yours, isn't it ? I mean, it really all belongs to you, not to Mr. Upton ?"

"Yes," said Lady Edith, coldly. "It is mine. It was my husband's wedding present."

"A magnificent present."

"Yes," said Lady Edith.

She spoke coldly, because her friend's somewhat odd question had set her thinking of all those estate-agents again.

After tea she took her friend for a long drive, and during the drive she related the annoyance to which she had been subjected by the agents. She talked of the agents with the utmost scorn and strong indignation.

"Ripe! They call it ripe for development. They say I ought to sell it for building."

"Oh," said Angela, "you wouldn't like to sell it, of course?"

"*Like!* I wouldn't sell it for any consideration whatever. If it was worth a thousand pounds a square foot, they should not have it."

"Oh," said Angela.

Lady Edith, while she dressed for dinner, left her friend time to smooth her hair and put on her hat again, and time also for reflection and musing. The visitor was on the terrace when the hostess came down, looking queenlike and gracious and altogether splendid.

"Edith," said the visitor, abruptly, "my husband says Mr. Upton has ceased to act for the United Bank."

"Has he? I know nothing of business matters."

"They are all having a baddish time in the City, my husband says."

And the guest looked hard at her hostess, who was looking down her vista at the church-tower.

"Are they?"

It was rather a silent meal. The two friends had talked about so many things already that there was not much more to talk about. Mrs. Dunford had asked if she might have her borrowed carriage ready to take her back to Rochampton at a quarter to ten; and the hour for departure soon came. It was a still, oppressive night; and there was not a leaf stirring as they stood once more on the terrace, listening for the sound of the carriage-wheels.

"I don't understand you," said Angela Dunford, at this last moment, very abruptly. "When you speak of Mr. Upton, you might be speaking of a stranger."

Lady Edith laughed.

"It is not necessary—is it?—to convey all one's feelings in the tone of one's voice."

Angela, she thought, had exceeded an old friend's licence. An old playmate and girl friend is entitled to be a bore, but she is not entitled to be impertinent.

"Edith, I have something on my mind. I have been trying to tell you—— Bertie says there are things being said about Mr. Upton—things that a wife ought to know. People are talking about it."

"Do you mean that he is paying the bills—of some actress?"

"Oh, no! They say—— Well, that his business is going to pieces—that he has been speculating unsuccessfully."

"That cannot be true. His firm does not speculate."

"How do you know? You say you know nothing about him and his business. Well, I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks," said Lady Edith. "Though, really, I don't understand why, or what I can do in the matter."

"Don't you? If my husband was in any mess, I should know what to do!"

"What?"

"Stand by his side and face the trouble with him. . . . Good night, Edith."

V

LADY EDITH, alone on the terrace after her friend had gone, walked up and down, thinking deeply.

She understood now. This was what had set the agents moving. Rumour was busy with her husband's name, not hers. Disaster was in the air; and about the threatened man all those who make their profit by wreck and ruin, like vultures, had begun to hover. Doubtless all the world had been talking, and, as always, the wife was the last to hear an echo of the ominous chorus.

Walking slowly to and fro, she thought of how this trouble had come unshowered into her quiet, guarded life. It was the last danger she had ever thought of: that the golden heaps of money would one day melt and vanish. Now, instinctively, she was sure that her husband's ruin would be complete and rapidly consummated. It was the common end—had she ever reflected—of the common business story. Trite, stale, and yet inevitable—she had seen it acted in stage plays, had read it again and again in stupid novels.

"I beg your pardon: my husband will not spare expense," the proud wife would say defiantly. "My husband is a rich man."

"*Was* a rich man," some one would heavily reply. "Say *was*, not *is*."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your husband is a ruined pauper." (Act-drop. End of Act II., etc.)

Slowly, as she walked to and fro, her thoughts worked. She who knew so little of business found herself thinking at last of business matters with an extraordinary perception and lucidity. He had lost the business of the United Bank. That was the beginning of the end. The august clients had taken alarm, and in self-protection had dealt the first death-blow. More important to an eminent stockbroker than to any beautiful society lady is reputation—a hundred times more important. His reputation is his life. To say that he is shaky is to set him shaking. And when once he shakes, who can stay the deadly oscillations? He is a top that has ceased to spin steadily and smoothly; wider and wider go the disastrous blundering circles; in each sweeping curve equilibrium is recovered as by a miracle. Then bang! Into the wall, into the gutter, anywhere.

That was what was happening now to the great business house in Lombard Street.

Trouble, perhaps disgrace, was coming fast into her quiet life. Disaster was in the oppressively heavy air. The sky

was growing darker; the long summer twilight was gone; and the starless night seemed to draw in, closer, heavier, each time that she turned in her thoughtful paces.

She was thinking of him now. At last her thoughts had passed from herself, from consideration of how the trouble might affect her, to how it might affect him. Suddenly, pity moved her. He would suffer; he must suffer very greatly in the ruin that, like the dark night, was closing him round. He was a strong man, a resolute, fighting sort of man, who would suffer torments of mind in his failure. He was not the sort of man to take defeat easily; to get up from the ground, brush the dust from his clothes, and try to smile as though nothing had happened. He had fought a good fight—she felt no doubt of that; had fought longer and harder than another sort of man. But, beaten at last, he would be heartbroken.

Pity pulled at her heartstrings as she thought of him—grave, silent, self-repressed, a doomed man walking in a crowd, envied by many while he carried his secret burden of dread. As she thought of him now, her friend's words sounded again in her ears. She must go to him to-morrow morning. She must stand by his side and help him to face his trouble. She must do her duty. And while she thought of her wifely duty, sadness, regret, weariness, possessed her—an infinite weariness made her footsteps drag as she turned from the dark terrace towards the lighted house.

There was a sound of voices in the hall, and for a moment she thought that her husband had come down—to excuse her the task of going to him. The weight slipped from her feet, and her steps quickened as she went towards the voices.

But she found only servants closing the shutters, while the butler talked to a belated visitor in the porch.

"A Mr. Jefferies, my lady," said the butler, coming from the porch. "One of Mr. Upton's clerks, my lady, from Lombard Street."

Then the visitor advanced into the hall.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said Mr. Jefferies, politely,

"at such an hour. But I hoped to find Mr. Upton here, or that he would have left me some message."

Mr. Jefferies was a bearded, middle-aged man—sedate, self-repressed, one might say, as his master: a fitting and suitable confidential clerk, with a fine Lombard Street manner.

"I live at Twickenham," said Mr. Jefferies. "So I just came on to Kingston to inquire."

Lady Edith, speaking to the visitor, was conscious of the interest shown in this visit by her servants. The butler was lending an attentive ear; the footmen were pretending to be busy with the shutters, slowly, noiselessly lifting bars and closing flaps; Sergeant, her maid, passing through the hall, lingered on the stairs; a baize door that led to the offices had moved slightly—there were hidden listeners. Disaster was in the air. Echoes of the ominous City chatter had been heard in outer halls and lobbies.

"Not finding him in South Audley Street, I thought I would come on. I thought perhaps he might have left a message for me with you."

"No."

"Knowing that he had been here this afternoon, I thought——"

"But Mr. Upton has not been here to-day."

"I beg pardon, my lady," said the attentive butler. "The master was here this afternoon—while you were out driving."

"For how long?"

"About an hour, my lady. He said he would not disturb you in any case; but you were out for the drive, my lady."

"Yes, my lady," said Sergeant, the maid. "He was in his room for over an hour."

"Oh, you saw him?" said Lady Edith, rather breathlessly. "Did he say if he would be down for the week-end? Did he leave any message—for *me*, I mean?"

"Er—no, my lady," said Sergeant. "No, my lady."

Lady Edith told the visitor to follow her into a pretty little room on the left of the hall, and to close the door.

"Tell me what you want exactly. There is some serious trouble—in Lombard Street?"

"Well," said Mr. Jefferies, with a deprecating gesture, "a pressure of business—certainly; and we are, perhaps, a little at sixes and sevens, as it were—for the moment."

Mr. Jefferies was calm, self-possessed, but graver in the little room than he had been in the big hall; and with every word he ruffled Lady Edith's composure more and more completely.

"I have no doubt I shall find Mr. Upton to-morrow morning, in South Audley Street—I have very little doubt. That's what I will do—go there, first thing in the morning, and take his instructions. We are—as I say—rather at sixes and sevens."

"What time will he go to the office to-morrow?"

Mr. Jefferies glanced round the room. He did not reply to this inquiry.

"What time in the morning do you expect him in Lombard Street?"

"We expected him there this afternoon," said Mr. Jefferies, gravely, "but he didn't come."

"And were you—did his absence make things more difficult for you?"

"Well—no easier. But I was not thinking of that. You see—the fact is—as I say, we expected him. It is, of course, important that he should give us all the fullest instructions—just now." And Mr. Jefferies pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"I don't suppose," he said, still looking at his watch, "that Mr. Upton tells you much about office-work and us—our names even. But I can assure you I have been in Mr. Upton's confidence. I assure you he reposes trust in me." And he looked up suddenly from his watch to Lady Edith's face. "I wish I could have seen him to-night. I wish I could have seen him. . . . If he is here, I beg of you to let me see him."

Lady Edith's hand had begun to shake, and her face was very pale. The man thought she was deceiving him : that, in this hour of crisis she was hiding her husband from his confidential clerk. Eagerly she protested her innocence ; and Mr. Jefferies, with his eyes upon her face, at once believed her.

"Forgive me," he said. "I see I was wrong. I thought it was just possible. Well, I can't do anything more. . . . Eleven-fifteen—the last train has gone from Kingston—so I can't go back to town to-night. . . . I'll just walk home to Twickenham, and go up first thing to-morrow."

He had frightened her. With every word he frightened her more. Disaster and disgrace were coming to her. All her composure had been blown from her by the cold wind of ruin. Lady Edith, of the third and fourth garden-parties, had vanished utterly : it was only a white-faced, frightened, commonplace woman who was clinging now to the visitor's arm, and imploring him to tell her the truth.

"For God's sake—don't keep things back from me ! What is it ? You—you want to warn him. How—how can I help him ? You—you want him to get away—before the morning ?"

"No, no," said Mr. Jefferies, stoutly, but very gravely. "I wonder you think that. No. Certainly not. There's nothing *wrong* in that sense. If—if we are in trouble—and I don't say we are——"

"You are not telling me your real thought."

Then, with a very curious change of manner, in broken sentences this Mr. Jefferies told her something of his real thought.

"You wouldn't understand—what I mean. I'm not thinking of the business : I'm thinking—of *him*. Lady Edith—you wouldn't understand. In business, men are bound together by more than the mere money. Employer and employed are sometimes—friends. That's what he and I are. I owe him everything—he trusts me—he knows that I pay my debt—in love. He is worried to death—I've been trying to make him

face it—to help him, as best I could—not to lose heart—to keep steady on his base—whatever happens.”

They were her friend's words, sounded again in this strange voice. To stand by his side and face the trouble with him! That was all the Lombard Street clerk wished to do. That was what was keeping him out of his bed at night. Love of his employer, not fear of losing his employment, was driving the man. Soon now the man left her, and she was alone to think over it.

In his dark hour her husband had not turned to her for love or sympathy. Why should he? What had she ever done to tell him that she would find either if the need came? Pity and shame were strong upon her as she went down a corridor, and turned on the electric light in her husband's little-used library. He had been here to-day—alone with his misery for an hour or more; and he had told the servants that she was not to be disturbed. In his misery he had wished to avoid her—as if she had been an enemy, not a wife.

“Not to lose heart. . . . To keep steady on his base whatever happens!” Even now, looking round the empty room, thinking of the man's words, she did not understand the man's real thought.

The room was large and unhomelike—without the pretty things that abounded in other parts of the house: a rarely used room, scrupulously neat and tidy. Tidier, perhaps, to-night than she had ever seen it: on the big desk no litter such as a busy man often leaves, every drawer emptied of memoranda and notes, all endorsed letters carefully burnt; there was the pile of black ashes in the iron grate—a room tidied and set in order by a man who meant never to use it again. At last she understood the thought.

When Sergeant, the maid, came to the open door, her mistress was on her knees by the bureau, with her hands shaking and rattling in the empty drawers. The maid's face was as white as that of her mistress, presently, as the girl stammered out her replies.

"My lady. I must tell you. . . . I—I am frightened. My lady, he gave me the letter to give you to-morrow morning—not before."

"Where is it? Give it me!"

Lady Edith snatched it from the girl's hands, and her own hands shook so violently that it seemed she would never be able to tear open the envelope.

"I am in great difficulties, and, really, I see only one way out of them. I am very sorry to leave you like this; but you must sell Limes Court and do the best you can. They tell me the ground is ripe for building."

Then Lady Edith rushed out into the corridor—ghastly white, with a hand above her head, calling, in a voice that rose to a scream.

"Reynolds! William! Who is there? Come here!" The servants had never heard or seen the like of it. "Wake them at the stables! The carriage! The horses! For God's sake be quick!"

VI

SUICIDE! Nothing else! Death was in the air!

With clenched hands she was pacing to and fro in the stable-yard, while the scared servants were dragging out her smart victoria, bringing harness for the sleepy horses, tumbling into their clothes, tumbling over one another in their frantic haste. Panic spread from her: she had filled the night with fear.

"For God's sake be quick! Can't—can't you see—it—it's life and death?"

Livid, shaking, stammering, she stood among her grooms, praying to them for speed. Never had pampered, well-paid servants seen the like of it. Swept away on a wind of horror, their proud, calm-voiced lady had vanished in the darkness between house and stables: here, in the lamplight by the coach-house doors, was a dishevelled, agonized suppliant praying to them for speed.

He was alone in the silent house so many miles away, calling to Death to come to him. It was a race against Death. If she could get to him first, if she could stand by his side, she could save him.

The delay almost drove her mad.

"All right, my lady. Right now."

The coachman, in his stable clothes, had pulled on his gloves after buckling the reins. Her maid had brought her a hat, and put a big cloak round her bare neck and shoulders. The maid, in bonnet and jacket, thought she was going for the drive also, but she was told to stand back.

"I best take a chap with me, my lady," said the coachman. "Jump up, Dick."

"No; no one! No one to add to the weight. Go on. Drive on."

Two of the stablemen had run forward with lanterns, to get the gates opened, to light them on their way. It was so dark beneath the spreading limes that the coachman was compelled to drive very slowly till they came out between the meadows. Then they went at a swinging trot along the smooth gravel to the twinkling lantern at the open gates. Slowly again through the stone pillars, and slowly turning, out into the broad high-road.

"Now—now gallop them. Make them gallop now."

Then the light from the carriage-lamps flashed upon brick walls, glass fronts of shops, white palings of villas; the beat of the iron shoes rang out loud and clear: the race with Death had started. The coachman shouted to a sleepy waggoner, and the light carriage swept by in safety. A policeman was shouting after them. A dog barked at them, followed them in a cloud of dust. From wall to wall the clatter of the galloping feet echoed and reverberated.

They were forced to let the horses walk when they came to the first steep hill, past the Kingston gate of Richmond Park.

"Pity we couldn't 'a gone through the park," said the coachman. "It would 'a saved us a lot if the park was open."

While they mounted the hill, she was standing up, talking to her coachman, with her white face touching his elbow sometimes. He explained that it would be fatal to try to gallop up the hill. "Only bust 'em before we get to Wimbledon Common. Let 'em catch their wind now, and we'll do nicely." He explained to her that the road through Richmond was under repair, or he would have gone that way. "It's a bit longer, but it's a better road, if it was in order ; but it isn't. Once we get to the top of the Common we'll have a fair run, down Roehampton Lane and on to Hammersmith."

All terms and ceremonies had disappeared in the darkness as they went up this first hill. No "my lady" even. Something in the heavy air stifled ceremony.

"Soon as we're over Hammersmith Bridge," said the coachman, "we shall get among the night-crawlers—the cabs, I mean. You best pick up a hansom then, and go on in that. My horses will be about beat by the time we reach the bridge."

Then they galloped once more, upon the flat, broad road, between stately, sleeping houses ; slower again, down the long hill ; and once more galloping, through the vale, towards the next hill.

With clenched hands she sat staring in front of her, almost frozen with horror. Death was in the air, flying before her in the darkness, flying to the far-off house where *he* stood waiting.

He would wait for the night. He would wait till the night fell deep and full, and then he would creep out of the silent house, steal to the black river, and drop from a stone parapet into the darkness below. He would wait till all was silent in the street beneath the windows, and then would go from her with a flash of fire and a puff of smoke. He would wait in the silence with a glass in his hand, would drink, let the glass fall and break upon the floor, and, gasping, would drop forward from his chair. In imagination she could see him. Would she be in time ? Had she stood by his side as night drew near, she could certainly have saved him.

In this long drive, all her married life seemed to come back to her. How selfish she had been always, how cold, how cruel—always! As she thought of it, her love seemed to come back to her. She had loved him. At first, not at all. Then, because of his love for her, because of the bond itself, she had been forced to love him. For a little while—for a little while after the priest had joined their hands, she had really loved him. If there had been children—if fate had been kind to them and made her a mother, she would have loved him always.

How cruelly selfish she had been! She thought of attempts he had made to bring her back to him—a word, a tone, a gesture, the meaning of which she had understood, but ignored. She thought of him lying ill, of his gratitude to her for sitting by his bedside. In imagination she felt his hand upon her wrist, heard his low voice: "Edith, don't read any more. Don't tire yourself. Edith, how good you have been to me while I have been lying here! I shall never forget your goodness to me—never forget it." And she had opened the book again and read on: not because he wanted to hear more, but because it was less trouble to read to him than to talk to him. She could not look back even upon this famous bedside reading without shame and regret.

How generous he had been always. He had given her all his gold; and when the gold was gone he would rather face death than empty-handed meet *her*. And she thought of how she had spent while he toiled; of her careless, grand, unquestioning way of using his money. She thought of something he had once said: "We are steadily increasing our expenses." "*We*"—not "*you*." And she had said: "I thought you were so rich"; or something like that—something utterly unworthy. "Yes," he said; "but I should be richer if I sometimes saved money." "Is it worth while saving?" she answered. "What should we save for?" That was a cruel—a bitterly cruel—thing to say.

Horror froze her blood now as she thought of these things.

She had been driving him on—to this. The carriage-lamps flashed upon brick walls again, and the clatter of the flying feet echoed loud and long. They were dashing down Roehampton Lane. Would she be in time? Henceforth she thought no more of the past. She thought only of him, with ever-increasing fear.

She had felt certain that he would be at the house in South Audley Street: that he would go there some time this evening, as he had been to Kingston, to make all tidy and neat in the room that he meant never to use again. Instinctively she had been certain that he would go there—to wait. But now, as she drew nearer to her goal, fear broke her thought, fear nearly drove her mad. The last half-hour—first with the beaten horses, and then in the hansom-cab on again from Hammer-smith Broadway—was an interminable agony.

No light showed from the house; not a sound came to her as she sprang from the cab, and with shaking fingers set her latchkey in the lock. A policeman watched her as she let herself into the dark hall, and then stood talking to the cabman.

“Seems in a hurry about something, eh? What’s up, I wonder?”

Light from beneath the door of his room on the first floor; and, when her shaking hand was on the door itself, something that seemed to make her heart turn to fire, and then stop beating—the sound of a footstep.

He was by his writing-table, stooping over a tin box, tidying his papers. There was a litter of papers on the floor; there were papers on his table, on the seats of chairs; papers smouldering above a heap of ashes on the hearth. Close to his desk lay his watch. He had been busily setting his papers in order: working through the silent night-hours, with his watch open to tell him when he must strike work, and use the revolver that lay waiting near the watch.

He was grey, haggard, dreadful to see—a doomed man,

methodically working on, with Death staring in his eyes and whispering in his ears.

Lady Edith was on her knees, an arm clinging round his legs, a hand pulling at his sleeve. She was moaning ; she was sobbing ; she was clinging to her husband with frenzied strength.

“Oh, oh, oh !—thank God !—oh, thank God, I am in time !”

That was how Limes Court came into the market.

Mr. Upton has been compelled to begin all over again. But he will succeed—because his wife is standing by his side, facing his troubles with him.

THE SQUIRE AND THE PARSON

WELL, Jack!" said the parson, "what are you looking for?"

"Th' 'ounds, sir," said the rustic.

The rustic was standing on the second bar of a gate; and the parson had paused as he walked by along the high-road.

"The hounds have gone an hour or more."

"But they may come back, sir. I heard un 'arf 'n 'our ago, running the vale proper."

And Jack Barnes, the rustic, speaking over his shoulder, gazed at the fine stretch of grass country, the upward sweep of the woodlands, and the bare ridge of down that shut out the happy valley into which horses and hounds and red-coats had vanished.

"Pity fox weren't driven for the mill, sir." And he nodded his head in the direction of the old mill, two miles away. "There'd 'a been leaping then, sir, all up the old Pint-ter-Pint course. They used to come round by the lower wood, sir, and the finish were the mill"—tracing out the line of country with extended arm. "You could see 'em most all the way sir, and the crowd in the mill-race meads was as big as Alderfield Fair. If you'll believe me, sir, there did used to be a steam round-der-bout, the cocoa-nut shies, and swing-boats, for all the world like a fair. I know the year the Squire won the race on Pioneer I was so near struck dead by one of them swing-boats as turned me fair sick. I was a-running for to see the young Squire weigh in—never looking for naught else—and it weren't so much as *that* from my head—it were not, sir. My legs, sir, was like turned to water, and *tremble!*

I trembled like—— Th' 'orn ! I heard th' 'orn down the vale—I heard it distinct——”

It was a hunting country. Gentle and simple, high and low, they loved the sound of the horn. This Jack Barnes, a decent fellow, as the parson knew, was but a type of the little southern community. Sucked in with their first supplies of milk was the deep love of sport ; and the child who had seen his mother drop the churn-handle and run to the garden gate, while the gay throng jogged by from meet to cover, was the father of the rough man with the pointing hand and the excited eyes. Why these poor louts, who had never in their long lives sat upon a saddled horse, or pieced together the tale of a fox-hunt from start to finish, otherwise than in broken chapters spread out over a course of years, only pursuing as the loose cart-horse pursues the express train flashing by its narrow pasture ground, outstripped long before it is stopped by the first fence—why these should be essentially as keen with regard to the matter as the glossy-booted, snowy-breeched lords of the land was a mystery to the parson : a mystery which had already given him pain.

“’Twas th' 'orn calling un off. Killed or gorn to ground I reckon. They won't come back now,” said Jack Barnes regretfully. And he turned and seated himself on the gate.

“I did not see you in church on Sunday, Jack,” said the parson kindly.

“No-o, sir.”

“How was that ? Not ill, I hope.”

“No sir”—very slowly. “I was a-ferriting. That's what I was a-doing, sir.”

“Then don't let it occur again.” And there was an assumption of authority in the parson's tone—a kind but authoritative reproof. “Be in your place on Sunday next, Jack.”

“Look here,—sir,” and the rustic grinned amiably, respectfully, and sheepishly—“I bean't goin' again—When you sees Squire there, you may look out for me.”

The young parson clenched his fists as though the yokel had struck him, and as though, in the heat of the moment, the other cheek was not about to be turned.

By entirely unconscious muscular action, Barnes's right leg had crossed to the field side of the gate when the parson took a step back, and, without a word, stamped away down the road to the village.

The Squire would not go to church.

With the loss of his mother he had lost the silken but unbreakable rope which, wet or fine, from year's end to year's end, on each seventh day, had hauled him out of the Hall across the park, and brought him up with a hitch and a double turn in the family pew.

He was perfectly frank when tackled on the subject.

"My dear chap, my poor mother over-did it with me. I don't say that I shall never go again. Certainly not. When I'm married, no doubt my wife will insist; and I suppose I shall have to begin again. But, meantime, honestly I can't stick it."

And Mr. Charles Draper, the Squire, almost groaned.

"But the example!" said the parson, very mildly. "You see, you have to think of others."

"I have to think of myself first," said the Squire. "It isn't that it does me no good. It does me positive harm."

"How can that be?"

"I'll tell you," said the Squire earnestly. "You know, I'm not a bit irreligious. I believe all right, but it simply bores me to death. I know the service by heart. I could rattle it through myself in fifteen minutes, without a slip; and yet I know, from the moment I'm boxed in my pew, it is going to take an hour and a quarter to get through the job—not counting the sermon."

"But surely that is not an ordeal——" the parson was beginning, with a grave but kindly smile.

"It is—it is," said the Squire. "Enough to make me

almost go out of my mind sometimes. What have I to think about? I'm not a bookish chap. I've no mental food to chew the cud with. I can't listen, because I know what's coming; and it comes so infernally slow that I want to give a view-holloa when it *does* come."

The parson laughed indulgently.

"Then I begin to think of all sorts of foolish and abominable things. In the sermon especially, it really seems as though the devil himself was personally attacking me. I wrestle with him, but I am so intolerably, maddeningly bored that I am powerless to resist."

The Squire's blue eyes shone steadily on the parson; his handsome boyish face was full of earnestness. He was explanatory, regretful, eager, but obviously stating his case with absolute truthfulness.

"I'll tell you what I was thinking about last time I went, while you were preaching your first sermon:—well, I was thinking what I should do if I was married to old Mrs. Edmundson. It was like a nightmare. I pinched myself, but I couldn't shake it off."

"My dear fellow!"

"Horrible! wasn't it? Then, in a flash, I was thinking of a trip to Paris with poor Nellie Granger, your schoolmistress. The boat, the train, the hotel—everything—as real as life, too. I could not get away from it, till you turned towards the altar when you'd finished. It must do a man harm to harbour such thoughts as those."

"I will give you a little book of meditations, written by one I used to know at——"

"No, no, old chap. It's no good. If I could I would, but I *really* can't. Come into the billiard-room and give me a licking at the pills. And, I say, I want to write you a little cheque for the school extension fund. I know you are dead keen about building."

This was the first of many conversations.

The Rev. George Craddock was thirty-three years old,

and Mr. Charles Draper was only twenty-seven. The parson was dark and strongly built ; the Squire was tall and fair and slender. The parson lived with a man and a maid in the snug little vicarage by the church ; the Squire lived in the fine old red-brick Hall, and was lord of the rich country-side—the brilliant fringe of the bare southern downs.

The Rev. George was a priest who believed in what he preached. He was a well-to-do celibate, clean-shaven, priest-like as to the thin nose and cold grey eyes, but with a secular turn to his mouth and lips and firm-set chin.

After a successful Oxford career and some good work in a poor London parish, he had been presented to the living of Chickford, which, strangely enough, was in the gift of an alien lord and not in the hands of the local squire.

Even in his undergraduate days he had lived very little with men of his own age ; and from the weight of college walls, the splendour of college chapels, the slow tongues of college dons, and, above all, the inspired writings ever in his mind, he seemed quite unconsciously to have acquired a dignity of manner and an old-world trick of speech which in the ordinary intercourse of life were apt to suggest a foolish affectation or a ludicrous eccentricity.

Of Chickford the Rev. George had known nothing before his arrival, except this : that it lay in the country hunted by the Alderfield Hounds, but was within easy reach of most of the best meets with Mr. Gaunt's. But, as the Rev. George had not hunted for thirteen years, and had no intention of ever taking the field again, this information, volunteered by a sporting acquaintance, was of no import to him.

Then, on the afternoon of his arrival in the December twilight, while he stood in his garden plot, portmanteaux, book-boxes, cricket bags, and tin cue-case still lying on the gravel path and grass border, the Squire came down to the garden-gate to bid him welcome.

He was wonderfully pleasant to look upon, with his blue eyes, his sunburnt face, his silky little moustache, his white

teeth, and happy smile. He had taken off his pink coat and tops, and replaced them by a shooting-jacket and brown gaiters and boots, but the white stock, the white breeches with a spatter of soil upon them, and the brass buttons of the hunt glittering upon his buff waistcoat, indicated what the day's work had been.

"I left hounds early on purpose to be here as soon as you turned up," said the Squire. "I hope we shall hit it off together."

And, as fully as on a first impression one man can love another, the parson loved the Squire.

He soon began to pick up all the local lore connected with the Drapers of Chickford—their history, and their past and present splendour. Some time, long before the dawn of civilization, it seemed, in a misty world of strife, when men lived in caves cut in the hillside, a Draper had come to Chickford with his stone axe in his strong right hand, and so hacked his way into the love and confidence of the neighbourhood that he became its lord paramount and perpetual. Then—after an interval—there had been the Draper who built the Hall, then the Draper who kept the hounds, and then this young reigning Draper's father.

To the parson, it was obvious, while the matrons of the village poured these matters into his attentive ear, that, as a family, the Drapers of Chickford were locally held to be of rather more weight in the world's scale than the Hohenzollerns.

"Yes; Charles Draper's mother nursed the property all through his minority," said Mrs. Burden, the doctor's wife, and a most worthy lady. "Ah, *she* was a saintly woman, Mr. Craddock. A *true* Churchwoman. I wish you could have known her. A woman of tremendous resolution! When she made up her mind to a thing, nothing would change her. If you wouldn't bend before her, you had to break. But that's a characteristic of the Draper family."

"Acquired by marriage even?" said the Rev. George, smiling good humouredly.

"Oh, she was a Draper by *birth*—a cousin. So that Charles may be said to be a Draper to the backbone."

With the family traditions, the hunting traditions of the place were also freely imparted. The Alderfield Hunt—a subscription pack—formed one of the oldest as well as one of the finest institutions of the kingdom. The Alderfield and Mr. Gaunt's always had shown more and *better* sport than any two other packs in the world. Mr. Gaunt's hounds, no doubt, were more universally known, more famous in printed records; but the Alderfield, really and truly, was the better country, and Chickford lay in the very heart and creamiest part of it. Of course, Mr. Gaunt, who had hunted his own hounds for thirty-five years, overshadowed everything by the greatness of his sporting fame, but his country was so vast that he had been obliged to cede a considerable portion of it to the Alderfield. And of all the flyers who had ever flown in the wake of the streaming hounds in either country, Mr. Charles Draper was unquestionably the most accomplished performer.

"One year he hunted from Rugby," said Mrs. Edmundson, a matron of considerable importance, with good-looking daughters. "Yes; he stayed there the whole season, just to see for himself how things were done; and it is a fact, Mr. Craddock, that he simply *astounded* them. They were positively glad to see the last of him. He cut them all down, he did indeed."

"I think he rides very gracefully," said one of the older and prettier daughters, "and he never seems to get hot. I know he was perfectly cool when he rode in after winning the Point-to-Point on Pioneer."

"Yes," said Mrs. Edmundson, "there used to be a meeting of the United Hunts every year; and Charles won the Hunt Cup at the last meeting, three years ago. They abandoned it after that. A great pity, because it was an *event*—something to look forward to. But such damage was done by the crowds."

A clergyman in a new neighbourhood is sure to be given his bearings by the fairer half of his flock, but the Rev. George

was quick to correct his observations by the aid of masculine pilots. In this matter of the horsemanship of the Squire there were, however, no two opinions. The rams and the ewes were unanimous. Captain Hill, Mr. Grove, Mr. Chandle, and the other men that he soon met at the Hall all endorsed the statements of the ladies. There was no doubt about it. The Squire was a marvellously clever rider to hounds.

"And he has taken to you in a most surprising manner," said Mrs. Burden impressively, as became his mother's friend. "You will have a great influence over him, and it will be your duty to exert it for his good. He is idolized by everybody here. He is very young, and, with the immense power in his hands and the tremendous temptations to which he is exposed, he needs one to guide his steps."

The Rev. George did not quite relish having the line or his duty traced out for him by the most friendly hand, but he refrained from telling Mrs. Burden so.

"Do you know you are going to make my task harder than I had deemed probable?" said the parson.

"Oh, don't let's go over all that again," said the Squire, sadly.

"I fear defection among your courtiers. That farmer—he who rears so many horses, and lets hunters on hire—he was at first punctual in attendance, but his place knows him no more."

"What! old Meldon? Has *he* dropped it? Oh he's getting fat and stupid. He won't go a yard this season. I saw him the other day messing about at a little place no bigger than that sofa! Shall I speak to the old fool?"

"Do what you no doubt did in the hunting-field. Give him a lead."

But the Squire only shook his head.

He was good to the poor, just to tenants, generous to relatives—filling his house with cousins and aunts, surprising them with new silk dresses, startling them with little cheques,

giving them luxurious lodging and unstinted board until they were ousted, not by him, but by other aunts and cousins panting to fill their places.

He was a stray lamb that *must* be brought back to the fold ; and the parson returned to the charge again and again, always with a tolerant smile on his close-shaven face.

"Look here," said the Squire, almost at bay. "If you would guarantee to rattle through the thing in forty-five minutes and swear you'd never preach for more than *nine*, for *your* sake I'd come."

"My dear fellow, how can I make such a promise? How can I bargain——"

"But you parsons seem to have no notion of time. Have you never waited three-quarters of an hour at a railway-station? It seems a month," said the Squire vehemently. "Do you know how long the Grand National takes? Four and a half miles across country. Isn't the time a man can ride such a race as that in long enough for a *sermon*?"

He was such a good young Squire.

He was supposed to have sown his wild oats as a Draper should—one season's crop on a big scale—two or three hundred acres under the riotous growth, and there an end of it. Of course the village gossips—one or two worthy matrons—fancied that he had kept a strip or two in cultivation in the neighbourhood of London, and that, when you saw him flash by in the station-brougham to catch the evening train after a week's hard riding, he was off to tend these minor patches. But the parson checked the tongue of gossip, and gave no credence to slander.

He was all that he should be. Only when you asked him to go to church, you ran head-first against the Draper characteristic. It was as though, where all was light and space and air, a heavy padded door jammed to in your face.

"It has almost come to this: Your abstention is like to lose me my hold on the parish."

"What old she-ass has told you that?"

"Your lack of sympathy robs me of theirs."

"My dear chap! If you want the truth, it's your lack of sympathy with us that's upsetting the apple-cart!"

And the Squire's tone was a trifle heated. It had been a long discussion this time.

"My lack of sympathy?" And the parson's tolerant smile faded away.

"Well, we are a sporting lot—a hunting lot—we always have been. Now, in your heart of hearts, you don't approve of hunting. You don't hunt yourself."

"I hunted before I took Orders. But now it would not be seemly. I have never condemned hunting."

"Why, my dear chap, what was your first sermon? It was an early frost that year. Hounds stopped before Christmas. And you began about it being a beautiful, white world that we rose to look out upon—Heaven's pure mantle which you loved to see, and for your part you wished it might lie there all through the Christmas season, and that men's hearts would be as white as the snow. Very eloquent! But not much in touch with a hunting lot like us fellows, with their horses kicking their cribs to pieces. Half the parish earn their daily bread by the hunting, one way or another."

"If my people are sliding from me from any such foolish thoughts, you must aid me to win them back. I cannot preach a lie—that to hunt a fox is the best thing a man can do."

"And I can't go and hear you preach, one way or another," said the Squire very hotly, "so let's drop the subject once and for all."

"That means that I must come here no more."

"What rot!"

"No; the Hall is very pleasant, and I value your company much, but my charge more. While you stay away from my Master's house, I must stay away from yours."

This was the parting of the ways. There was no quarrel, no hard word, no break of friendly greetings when the two men met. But for three months the village had known that

diplomatic relations had ceased, and that, to all intents and purposes, the two great powers of the village were at war.

Twilight was falling, and there was a touch of frost in the still air as the parson jogged along the Alderfield high-road on his quiet old pony, telling himself that he was a beaten and a disappointed man.

He had been carrying spiritual comfort to a bedridden grandam on the skirts of his parish ; but, throughout his visit to the stuffy little sick-room, his thoughts had been working upon the words spoken this morning by the man Barnes. The brutal speech of the thick-headed peasant had embodied the fear which had weighed more and more heavily upon the Rev. George for the last three months. War with the Hall must in the end mean the loss of his flock. Poor foolish sheep, trained from birth to follow their leader, how could the shepherd drive them when their leader turned rogue ? He had realized from the first that if he failed to get the bell-wether into the pen, no hurdles would hold the rest of them.

Mingled with the bitterness of his priestlike regret, there was something of personal pain, the twinge of wounded vanity, in his failure. It had seemed, in the beginning, so small a thing to induce one smiling young man to mend his ways. A little pressure, the influence of a strong character over a weak one, a friendly appeal to the better side of a radically amiable nature, a request urged, if necessary, as a personal favour, and the thing would be done.

Presently, in the silence of the dusk, the voices of men and the sound of horses' hoofs ringing clear on the hardening road followed him as he moved sadly forward. He never looked round. He knew that these were people returning from the chase—the Squire, Chandle, Grove, and the rest—noisy and jubilant after a triumphal day—perhaps a fox killed within a yard of its hole. “A noble day's work,” he thought bitterly.

“Hullo, old chap !” cried the Squire genially.

"We've had the run of the season!" said Captain Hill.

"A real clinker!" said Mr. Grove.

"And no mistake!" said Mr. Chandle.

Their red coats were splashed with mud. One of them had torn his face with a bramble streamer; another had smashed his hat under a tree; but their voices were loud and enthusiastic, as of men who had been out to battle and come home flushed with the full glory of conquest.

"Come up to dinner to-night," said the Squire eagerly.

"And we'll drink a health to old Pioneer," said Mr. Grove. "I never saw him carry you better"—nodding admiringly at the Squire's gallant old bay.

"Look here, Draper," said the parson, drawing ahead and close to the side of the Squire. "What I have long dreaded has come to pass." And earnestly, hurriedly, the phrases tumbling over each other in a torrent of eloquence, the parson told the Squire the evil words of Barnes, and the despair and anguish they had unchained in his breast.

"This means that unless you give in, I must go. With you against me, I am powerless to hold my own."

The Squire laughed. "I assure you it's not that a bit," he said kindly, but still smiling, while the parson's face was contracted and convulsed with emotion. "It is simply your attitude towards the hunting that has turned Barnes and the rest of them rusty. I assure you—if you only rode—just to the meets even——"

The parson struck his forehead with his clenched hand in an extraordinary gesture of despair. It was just the action which would be appropriate to an actor representing on the stage a desperate man who hears that his last resource has failed him, but, to the Squire, it was startling and painful in its stragheness.

"Then look here," gasped the parson, and his voice was harsh and strained. "I challenge you on your own ground. Will you ride me four miles across country?"

"Chandle! Grove!" The Squire called to the men

behind him. He thought that something had snapped in the parson's brain, just now, when he struck his forehead.

"I am bitterly in earnest," said the parson. "I take you at your word. I have lost them because I do not ride? Well, I will ride to win them back! And the wager shall be this: If I win, you come to church; if I lose, I leave the parish!"

This was what the parson said in the growing darkness, as the hunting-men crowded round him—excited, eager, boisterous, all talking at the same time. Not once did the parson say it, but again and again. "That is my challenge. Four miles! Do you refuse? Wherever you like! I am bitterly in earnest."

And at last the Squire said "Done." What else could he say, in the circumstances, with four or five friends about him, who pronounced the parson's offer one of the handsomest, most sporting, and completely satisfactory which it had ever been their privilege to overhear?

"But you haven't a horse," the Squire objected feebly.

"I will procure one," said the parson resolutely.

"Oh, it's too ridiculous!" said the Squire.

"Is it a match?"

"Of course it is," said Mr. Chandle.

"Good morning, Meldon. May I speak to you?" said the Vicar of Chickford at the gate of Mr. Meldon's little garden.

"Certainly, sir. What can I do for you, sir?" said Mr. Meldon, coming down the path.

He was a big man, with a broad face and a double chin; and he did not appear to welcome his Vicar with any marked degree of cordiality.

"Well," said the parson, with a slight hesitation, "I desire a racing-horse. Can you let me have one on hire?"

"A racing-horse? I ain't got no racing-horses," said Mr. Meldon, pushing his square-topped bowler back on his forehead.

"One that can gallop and jump and stay over four miles of a fair hunting country," said the parson.

Mr. Meldon drew himself back a step or two on the path ; then turned, and called lustily, "Missus ! Come out here, Missus !"

"Well, what ever is it ?" said Mrs. Meldon, in the porch of the house.

She was a hard-faced lady of thirty-five, with dark hair, and a thin, pinched look about the nose and lips. In the sportingly expressed gossip of the village, when compared with her husband in strength of character and capacity of household and general control, she was held to be very much "the better horse of the two." There was even less of cordiality in her greeting than in her husband's as she bade the parson "good day."

"Well, what is it ?" she asked Mr. Meldon.

"Look here, sir. Would you mind repeating of that again ?"

And the parson once more recited his requirements.

"What for ?" asked Mrs. Meldon sharply. "What do you want such a horse for ?"

"To ride," said the parson simply. "To ride a match with."

"To ride yourself ?" asked Mrs. Meldon.

"Yes ; to ride myself."

"But *can* you ride, sir ?"

"Well, Mrs. Meldon, that is the question I ask myself. As a lad, to the age of seventeen, I rode regularly, following the hounds when occasion served."

"Did you, now ?" said Mr. Meldon, scratching his head. "I never knew that."

"But have I lost such equestrian art as I once possessed ? I cannot say ; but I hope not."

"And who may you be wanting to ride against ?" said Mrs. Meldon.

"The young Squire. He and I have made up a friendly match."

"Oh, sir, it's all some nonsense of the Squire's. It's just a joke they have been having with you."

"Indeed, Mrs. Meldon, it is no joke. The challenge is my own; and a horse to bear me I must certainly find. If my good friend here cannot help me, I must seek elsewhere."

Mr. Meldon tilted his hat forward, rubbed his fat chin, and stood silently gazing at his Vicar, with a perplexed grin on his ample face.

"If you have no horse of speed," said the Vicar, "it will be of no avail to lend me another; for, as you know, the Squire's horses are indeed fleet of foot."

"Well, I never heard the like of this!" said Mrs. Meldon, laying her hand on the latch of the gate. "Will you step inside, sir? I do believe you're but taking a rise out of Jim and me. But step in, sir—step in."

And the sharp lines of Mrs. Meldon's face softened and relaxed into an expression of sunshiny geniality which the Vicar had never yet seen in that quarter.

"You are very good, Mrs. Meldon, but believe me, I am not joking."

"Go on, sir," said Mr. Meldon, chuckling. "It's a bit too rich to take us in!"

"Don't be a fool!" said Mrs. Meldon. "Can't you see Mr. Craddock is in downright earnest? I could—the moment he spoke—with half an eye."

"No! Is he?" cried the rebuked husband. "Well, I'm blowed!" And he struck his great thigh with his open hand.

"You see, sir," said Mrs. Meldon, pouring out a glass of mahogany-coloured sherry in the best parlour, and urging her guest to take this light refreshment after his walk—"you see, sir, it's a serious thing to go and risk breaking of a horse's neck by racing him under one as is not exactly used to it, as it were—even supposing Jim here had a likely one."

"I should indemnify you for all hazard," said the parson.

"Heaven forbid we should refuse to support a gentleman in such a bit of fun—and him the vicar of the parish," said

Mrs. Meldon devoutly. "But it is but natural that Jim has to look at the thing all round. It would mean money lost to us, without counting of accidents. Our hunters let regular. Two guineas a time, and two days a week. Now, to take a horse and train him for a race would be keeping him for that purpose and nothing else for weeks."

"Captain Hill bade us ride our race a month hence," said the parson. "If this be so, the horse which you devote to me will forfeit a rent of sixteen guineas for his field service."

"For what, sir?" said Mrs. Meldon. "Oh, yes; that's right, sir."

"Well, to be fair, I must pay you more. Mrs. Meldon, if you can set me upon such a creature, trained and ready, as shall give me a chance of winning my venture, I will pay you thirty guineas, and will further recoup you for any injury the poor beast may suffer in the contest."

"Well spoken, sir!" cried Mr. Meldon, smacking his leg again. "Spoken like a gentleman—and a sportsman!"

"Be quiet, Jim, and ring that bell. . . . The Squire'll ride old Pioneer, that's a certainty. I only wish to goodness, Jim, we'd never parted with Crocodile."

"Was Crocodile a racing horse?" asked the parson.

"He was that, sir. Not strictly speaking, you know, sir. But he was a rare beggar to leap and gallop. As sure as I stand here, he'd have taken the Hunt Cup off the Squire and Pioneer if I could have had one of my chaps a-riding of him, instead of being bound to put up a member of the Hunt. Captain Hill's a very nice gentleman, sir, but he ain't no more good to ride a race than my foot!"

"Why did you sell the animal?" asked the parson.

"Well, you see, the old devil were not honestly safe to ride with hounds. You could *not* steady that horse if he meant going, and you could not start him if he didn't mean to go. The missus will tell you what a fright I give her on him in the field behind the stables. So we sold him to Rogers, over at

Alderfield, for thirty-five pounds, to see what he could do with him along with the military for the regimental races."

"Have you rung, ma'am?" said the apple-cheeked maid at the parlour-door.

"Yes," said Mrs. Meldon decisively. "Tell them to put a saddle and bridle on the old bay mare and take her round to the field."

It was a pleasant sight to see Mrs. Meldon, with her petticoats well tucked up, take up a position on a molehill in the muddy field, while the Vicar, seated upon the rat-tailed, fiddle-headed mare, had his stirrup leathers carefully adjusted and his black trousers bound about his ankles with bits of string, by the ready hands of the dealer and his men.

"Now, sir, canter round the field, just to get your seat like," said Mrs. Meldon, with shrill and authoritative voice; and her beady eyes flashed with excitement. "And when you come back, take her over them hurdles. Now, holler, Jim, to wake the old slug! She's half asleep!"

"Tally ho! Whoop! Tally ho! Forrard away!" roared Mr. Meldon, and the black-coated figure and the rat-tailed mare started away at a sedate canter.

"Lord's sakes! Set back!" screamed Mrs. Meldon, as the Rev. George landed on the mare's shoulders while she made her cow-like progress over the rotten old hurdles.

"Bring her round and shove her at 'em again, and set back for the love of mercy!" cried Mrs. Meldon. "Get behind her, Jim, and holler again!"

Then, with an attendant train, the master beating a stick inside his hat, and the helpers screeching, the old mare came round to the attack again.

This time she was moving. With her long ears cocked and the old rat-tail on high, she came on in gallant style, standing off at her jump most stoutly, while the Rev. George lay back till the shovel hat and the hairless stump nearly met, and beast and man sailed over the obstacle triumphantly.

"He'll do!" cried Mrs. Meldon. "Jim, we must help

him through with this job. Who'd ever have guessed he'd 'ave had the grit in him? Much better, sir, much better!"

The parson's face was pale, and he was gasping for breath, as a man who had been swimming against a strong tide.

"The quite unwonted—er—exercise, at first, exhausts one," he gasped. "I, too, must undergo a course of training, Mrs. Meldon!"

"I just bin over to see White of the Mill," said Mr. Meldon, touching his hat respectfully to the young Squire. "He's all right, sir."

"Is he?" said the Squire. "I didn't know he'd been wrong. What has been the matter with him?"

"I mean about the race, sir. He don't put objections of any sort—only stipulates we make good all damages, as is but fair."

"What race?" said the Squire shortly.

"You and Mr. Craddock's, sir."

"I'm not going to ride any race with Mr. Craddock."

"Indeed, sir? Is that so, sir?"

"Certainly not."

"Oh come, sir, you can trust me! I am in the know, naturally. Captain Hill and Mr. Grove have been in half a dozen times, and we've pretty nearly settled everything. The old Pint-ter-Pint course, and the finish at the mill. I ain't seen Churchill yet, down at Firbank Farm, but the rest is agreeable."

"Look here, Meldon," said the Squire. "It's all nonsense. And you mustn't encourage him in such folly. You don't want him to break his neck, I suppose?"

"Why, no, sir," said Mr. Meldon thoughtfully. "That's just what the missus and I don't want him to do. And that's why we've taken him in hand as we have done. And he's a beggar to stick to his work, sir! Down at our place every mornin', seven o'clock, sir, and hard at it, on anythink you care to put him on."

"What do you mean? *Learning to ride?*"

"Well, recovering of it like! It seems he did ride once—regular."

"You have done very wrong to encourage him to make such a fool of himself," said the Squire.

"Have I, sir? Well, I must say I thought that was your doing, sir," said Mr. Meldon humbly, "and you wished it, sir."

"What do you think you are going to put him on when you've done with him?" asked the Squire abruptly. "What have you got that would have a chance against any of mine, I should like to know, supposing he had been riding races all his life?"

"Oh, we'll find him something for to ride, sir," said Mr. Meldon, slowly, and rather sheepishly. "I'll do my best for him honestly, sir, for he's fairly come over the missus and me, I do assure you, sir, by the way he goes at it. He's a good plucked 'un—there's no denying it, sir!"

"O Mr. Craddock, you quite startled me," said the elder Miss Edmundson, with a nervous little catch in her voice. "I thought you were in the vestry."

Evening service (a saint's day) was just over, and they had met in the shadow of the church porch. The very sparse congregation had dispersed, and the sexton was barring and bolting the heavy doors behind them.

"I come from the vestry now," said the Vicar. "Were you waiting to speak with me, Miss Edmundson?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Edmundson. "I was hurrying home."

And they walked side by side down the church path towards the pale flicker of the oil lamp hanging above the gate.

"But I *do* want to speak to you, now I have met you," said Miss Edmundson, with a little laugh and another nervous catch in the voice. "I have something for you." And she fumbled with a brown paper parcel.

"For *me* or for my poor?" asked the Vicar.

"For you, yourself," said Miss Edmundson, gulping. "I know people always make so much fun of such gifts that I'm almost ashamed to offer them. But I want you to, *please*. Will you?"

The flickering lamp lit up the eager, shy, and blushing face of the girl and the gravely attentive face of the priest.

"I worked them all myself, and at first I meant them for somebody else. But now I want you to have them—Please take them. I must go. Mother will be wondering!" And she thrust the soft parcel into her vicar's hands.

"Good-night. Throw them away, if you never wear them and don't want them. But I worked them myself."

She had taken his hand, mechanically, and was unconsciously pressing it in her nervous agitation.

"And, Mr. Craddock, I do want you to win. I do hope you will win. I think you are splendid."

"My child," said the priest, "what is this?"

But she was gone. Her light footfall fluttered fast away down the soft road; and the parson turned thoughtfully homeward, with the embroidered slippers in his hand.

"What's the good of blackguarding me about it?" cried Mr. Chandle indignantly. "Is it my fault if half the village have heard about it? And what does it matter if they have? Poor beggars, they don't get much to excite 'em!"

"Beyond arranging things with the farmers and Meldon, I haven't spoken to a soul about it!" said Mr. Grove.

"You have all encouraged him to make an infernal ass of himself!" said the Squire angrily.

"I don't see that at all," said Mr. Chandle warmly. "You accepted his challenge."

"You fellows forced me to by egging him on. But it would be a nice thing for me if it ended in his breaking his neck."

"Why should he break his neck?"

"I'm not going to give him a chance," said the Squire. "I shall write to his bishop if I hear any more of it."

Mr. Grove and Mr. Chandle turned suddenly grave, looked at each other, and then at the Squire.

"My dear fellow, you mustn't do that."

"You mustn't think of doing that."

"Why not? It's just what I shall do."

"No, no! If you did that, people would only think one thing."

"Everybody would say you had funked it."

"*Funked it! I!*" said the Squire, his eyes blazing.

"I mean, the villagers. They would, old chap, really. No, no," said Mr. Grove. "Set your mind at rest. *He* won't break his neck."

"I know for a fact," said Mr. Chandle, "that Meldon has bet a fiver he completes the course."

All this was late at night, in the Hall billiard-room.

"What's that?" said the Squire, turning towards the French window. "There's some one outside on the terrace."

It was Captain Hill, wrapped in a martial cloak, and with a face full of importance.

"I saw the light, so I came round here," said the Captain, stepping into the room. "I couldn't come before. I've been dining at the Burdens. But I came as soon as I could—to let you know something you ought to know, Charles."

"Well, what is it?" said the Squire.

"I found out, this afternoon, at the George, that Meldon has taken six to four—thirty pounds to twenty. At this price—neither more nor less—Meldon has bet his two tenners that the parson beats you."

"Who the devil told you that?"

"Barker. Barker laid the odds himself. But I have found out something more than that." And the Captain's words came slowly and solemnly:

"I've seen the horse the parson's going to ride. *Meldon has got back old Crocodile.*"

"No? No?" cried Mr. Grove and Mr. Chandle.

"I have seen the old beggar," said Captain Hill. "I should have known him among a thousand. You remember, Meldon sold him to some coping liveryman over at Alderfield. Well, as sure as I stand here, he has got him back again."

And now the torment of the young Squire began.

It was all right in the daytime, with the sunshine and action of life to keep his thoughts gay and bright, although in everything which he did—the careful attention to the training of his horse, the gallop before breakfast, the perpetual visits to the stable, the inquiries as to appetite and spirits, the close scrutiny of unbandaged legs, the long talks with the head groom as to the minutest detail of diet—there hung upon him a heavy sense of injury and resentment. His friends had treated him badly. Fair-weather friends, they had all failed him when the pinch came. Suppose that they had been living in the old duelling days, and that he—a man who had made his proofs, who had shown himself to be gallant and staunch not once but a dozen times—had received some grotesque challenge to fight, from a foolish, unwarlike fellow that he had never injured. Might he not have laughed away the proposed combat, and should not his friends and equals have sought jealously to save him from an ordeal devoid of glory and pregnant with the ridiculous? But what had his friends done? At the first hint of his intention to treat the half-witted challenger with contempt, they had plainly said: "Hero of a hundred fields you may be, but, if you won't fight now, we shall say you are afraid to fight!"

He carefully concealed his resentment, and forced himself to find the laughing word and the light-sounding reply for one and all. Every hunting day new praises of the parson came wafted on the wintry air at the meet and the covert-side.

"You have bucked that parson into a regular sporting character. How did you lure him on, Draper? . . . The best thing I have heard for years. . . . Oh, yes; we shall

all be there to see the fun ! They tell me he is becoming the idol of the village. Twenty people hanging about to watch him gallop round Meldon's farm ! My wife says she has never seen the church so full as it was last Sunday morning," etc., etc.

But it was at night, tired out and yet sleepless, lying in the big, soft bed in his spacious room, that the young Squire suffered. Suppose that the man succeeded in sitting on his horse, why should he not be beaten ? What could all his science, all his nerve, all his resolution avail him if old Pioneer tripped or blundered and his rival kept going ? And why not ? Pioneer was an old horse now ; and his excited brain worked out the horse's history again and again. Bought as a four-year-old, but probably nearly five years old ; then hunted two seasons—no : *three* seasons ; and then, at the end of the third season, winner of the Hunt Cup. And that was three years ago. An old horse ! Ten or eleven years old. But, God bless him ! he never trips and never blunders ; and, when considering age, how about that old Crocodile ?

Fool ! fool ! to have permitted himself to be drawn into such a trap. Everything to lose and nothing to gain. Whatever happened, this wretched man must cover himself with glory. To be beaten at his own game, on his own ground, before his own people by a black-coated parson ! Humiliation—disgrace—despair—damnation !

And the Squire would fling himself out of bed, feel his way across the room to the water-bottle, and drink a tumbler of the cool well-water to slack his fever. Then, lying down again, a temporary calm would come ; and, easy, confident for a few minutes, he would, in memory, ride over the course—the course known to him and not to the parson. There was one really nasty place, a small brook, not wide, but deep, with a few ragged bushes to you, and a ragged hedge on the other side with stunted trees growing fairly close together. A mere nothing if encountered with hounds. Given time to choose your place and your pace, to let your horse understand what he

has to do and then make him do it—nothing at all. But, coming down upon it (it was at the bottom of a slope) at racing pace, a trap—a dangerous trap. It was here that the parson would break his neck; and all England would execrate the Squire as bloodguilty although the law could not touch him.

But Crocodile knew the course. That resolute old brute, without a really sound leg to his portion, booted and gartered and blinkered up to the last moment—that fiery-eyed, tearing, pulling blackguard of a dealer's pride—had galloped and leaped the course three years ago, and had nearly snatched the cup from the Squire's hand.

Fool! to have goaded the parson to madness and let himself into such a fix as this! Why should the man fall off? They all said he could ride. Meldon and his virago of a wife had been coaching him for six weeks. Would Meldon have backed him if he were likely to break his neck? No: it would be a fair race, ridden out to the end; and, lying in his luxurious bed, in the dead, unhappy night, the Squire told himself that, if the parson won, he, the Squire, would commit suicide.

Afraid? They had talked of people thinking that he was afraid of the parson, and now his heart was cold with fear—a creeping, clammy, superstitious fear. If all the county had challenged him to ride—Grove and Hill and the near ones, and the far ones too, the steeplechasing peer from Mr. Gaunt's, and the great soldier rider from Alderfield—how gladly would he have ridden races with them all, one after the other, if the programme took a twelvemonth to get through! There would have been no lying awake then; no cold shivers to disturb him. But now he knew that he was afraid: afraid that, struggle how he might, the finger of some mysterious power was upon him, dooming him to defeat.

Lying alone in one wing of the great house, in the dead middle of the black night, with ghostly creakings of the panelled walls and sighing of wind and ticking of clocks in the empty corridors, the young man suffered, oh, he suffered

intolerably, for the great wrong he had done. Why, oh, why had he obstinately refused to go to church? Why had he done this evil thing? Why had he broken his mother's rest in the cold splendour of her place of repose? Why had he provoked her by his abstention, continued and continued? Why had he roused her resolute spirit to wander through the shadow world, a Draper of the Drapers, firm in her purpose even on the other side of the tomb—wandering, seeking, unresting, until she had contrived to send this fiend in a black coat and a shovel hat to bruise his heart and lacerate his pride as punishment of his misdeeds?

For, a prey to his superstitious horrors, tossing and turning in the half-delirium of insomnia, the poor young Squire firmly believed that this was what had happened.

Sinking into the warm oblivion of sleep, on his narrow pallet, in his quaint little cottage bedroom, the parson was reciting to himself, word by word, the letter which he had despatched in reply to the chaplain of his Bishop:

"It is no idle report, but a fact; so I cannot publicly contradict it, as his lordship appears to suggest. Certainly I shall ride this race, because, as I would with all humbleness assure his lordship, I believe that it is expedient, in the best sense of the word, that I should do so. In the peculiar circumstances of this parish, and under the existing condition of its thought, my conduct will not be considered unseemly or derogatory. Not without study, not without preparation, shall I ride out to do battle with the arrayed force of folly and prejudice that has hitherto obstructed and frustrated my best efforts."

That was the gist of it. That was an absolutely sincere expression of his earnest thought on the matter. He was to do battle with the arch-enemy of mankind; and the stake was to be the spiritual welfare of these heavy-footed, slow-witted rustics. If, and he prayed that it might be so, something like a miracle were vouchsafed, and it should be given to him to prevail over the enemy in the sight of all men, then their hard

hearts would be softened and their wandering feet would be brought back into the way of grace.

Not without study, and certainly not without preparation. The preparation, as Mrs. Meldon understood the word, had been terrible. Broken in joints, aching in back, sore in limbs, he had never faltered or wavered. The labour and distress of the thing had crushed out sensation and thought—except the thought of the reward he was suffering to attain. That thought had dominated his life to the exclusion of all else. He had been an uncomplaining slave in the hands of his trainers, submitting to torture with the smile of an early martyr. The solid flesh had melted away from him; his cheekbones had become prominent; but his arms and legs seemed to have been turned into steel and whipcord. He had lost fifteen pounds since he first sat in Mr. Meldon's scale, and yet, even now in his sleep, the shrill voice of Mrs. Meldon crying in his ear: "Set back, for the Lord's sake! Set back, can't you?" made him wake from a troubled dream in a bath of perspiration.

"Lord 'a mercy! Look at the crowd in the Mill-race meads," cried Jack Barnes, waving his hat in his rapture. "A'most as big a crowd as I ever see for the P'int-ter-P'int!"

There was indeed a large concourse of company on wheels, on foot, and on horseback. The appointment had been a carefully guarded secret which had leaked out through three counties. The entire population of Chickford, excepting only the bedridden and incurably insane, were naturally present, augmented in force by whosoever "loved a bit of fun" within a fifteen-mile radius.

Single flags were flying at the turning-points and double flags in the straight; luncheon-baskets were open; corks were flying; cocoa-nuts were there in plenty for the winning of the true eye and the strong arm; the red coats of the hunt servants flashed gay in the sunlight; informally installed stewards,

clerks, judge, and starter could be distinguished by their agitation and excitement; beauty and gallantry, effervescent youth and honoured age, were alike on the tiptoe of expectation: in a word—Mrs. Edmundson's word—it was an event.

There was to be a farmers' scurry afterwards, a rough-and-tumble scramble to glut the yokels with delight, but what everybody—high and low—had come to see was the match, the great match at catch-weights over four miles of a fair hunting country between the Squire and the parson.

The start was at Churchill's Farmhouse; the finish was to be at the Mill, as in the past.

They were to start at half-past one; and, by Miss Edmundson's little watch, which shook in her trembling fingers, it was already a quarter to two.

"Now, gentlemen!" It was Captain Hill, with loud military voice and authoritative official manner, in Churchill's farmyard. "If you please, we'll despatch you on your journey."

The young Squire slipped off his long drab coat; the clothes were swept from Pioneer's strong back, amidst an approving murmur of rustics at the gate.

Man and horse were pictures. In the pink of condition, both of them: gloss and glow of satin skin, lustre of silk hat, shimmer of boots, glitter of brass buttons and of spurs and bit and chain, flash of eager eye, glory of red coat and polished leather, splendour of orchid flower and cream breastplate—they were all glitter, glitter, man and beast, dazzling the eye to look upon them.

"Well, good luck to you, old chap!" cried the young Squire in his fresh, hearty, pleasant voice, and he clapped his rival on the shoulder. "We can't both win, so I mustn't wish you more than a good second, eh?"

All those superstitious horrors of the small hours had been lifted from him; and now, in the sunlight and the hour of action, the Squire was his own man again—alert, easy, confident, eager for the fray.

But so many people, all talking at once, were about the Vicar that he hardly heard or understood what was being said.

"Now then, sir, come on." And, as Mr. Meldon almost tore off the parson's shabby old ulster, and disclosed him to view, a genuine burst of admiration arose.

Everybody had wondered how the parson would attire himself on the occasion, and there had been a general feeling that the clerical hat and coat must of necessity be abandoned as painfully incongruous. The parson had felt this himself, and had determined to do the thing in style, to fight the fight in the garb of the children of darkness. Two visits to Savile Row and Bond Street—and here he stood transformed, in low topper, black frock-coat, cords and black jacks, long cutting whip in hand, a business-like if sombre figure, which might have stepped forth from one of the well-known sporting prints of fifty years ago.

"Splendid! You look immense, old boy!" cried one of his excited parishioners.

And now, as one in a dream, the parson is led forth upon Crocodile, and jogs along the lane in a little knot of horsemen, another little cavalcade in front surrounding the Squire, while Mr. Meldon, hot and perspiring, rides jealously at the parson's side, pouring out his final instructions in an overpowering flood.

"Now, I never let you get on the horse before to-day: for why? For this, sir: he'd 'ave found you out and turned nasty. He would! I know the old devil. Are yer lengths right? Sure? Well, just you set there as you're setting now, and don't interfere with him with hand or heel. Don't you let him guess but what he's got the finest jockey in England on his back. And mind you set back, as the missus says, over the first fence or two. He's a nasty trick of throwing his head, and I don't want to see you knocked off in the second field."

"No, no!" murmured the parson.

"And here's a thing I'll tell you now, sir. It ain't no four miles you've got to go, and never was, though they always called it so, but it ain't, not by a long chalk, as I know. No ;

nor not three miles. Well, you just follow the Squire. Let him go on, and you just follow. This is a horse that knows his job, and don't you attempt to bustle him. If you was to begin messing him about, he'd turn it up here in this lane now; and not you nor me, nor twenty more, would get him out of it. But *when* he's started—if he does start, and I shall be there, yer know, with my voice, which he knows—he'll go on and you won't stop him. You just set down, then, and leave it to him. Don't drive him, and don't check him."

"Yes, yes!" said the parson.

"And when you gets in sight of the Mill, with a straight run for home, send him along then. Don't be afraid of being in front then. Go ahead, and keep on going. He won't refuse with you then."

Mrs. Meldon, in a surprisingly gaudy bonnet with purple strings, was perched in a gig at the gate where the riders turned into the fields. Her lips were dry and closely compressed; her eyes were on fire. She hopped up and down by the side of her driver like a bird of strange plumage.

"Keep ahead of all them 'orsemen, you ass!" she said to the charioteer. "And as soon as ever they're off, let go for the Ridge as fast as yer can tear!"

"Oh, crikey! Ain't he an ugly one!" said a voice as the parson rode through the gate.

It was poor Crocodile who was condemned thus—not the parson.

In sober truth, he was no beauty. Of a dunnish chestnut in colour, he measured sixteen-hands-two of coarse, long-legged, raw-boned, uninteresting horseflesh. He was heavily booted in front; he was capped-hocked behind; and a long patch of broken white hair on his belly told the tale of a serious injury in some bygone struggle. One had an impression of blood in spite of the ugliness, a Romanish nose, but a fine broad forehead, with a large bold eye—a blackguard, but a blackguardly aristocrat: one who had come to the gutter, but not one who had been born there.

That was the impression, so far as one's excitement would allow one to think at all. Then, as Mr. Meldon and the parson wheeled about, the great brute let fly behind, a lunge at the empty air, gave his back a jerk, grunted and bucked once, and one instinctively felt that there was propelling power about him if nothing else.

A titter ran round the field. The parson had lost one of his stirrup-irons; Meldon's men were putting his right foot back into its proper place; Mr. Meldon was whistling and cajoling and cheering.

"Oh, my goodness! He's going to turn nasty!" wailed Mrs. Meldon, standing up in her gig.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" shouted Captain Hill. "Now you understand—but I'll tell you again. Keep turning to your left, outside the single flags all the way, and between the double flags when you come to them."

"So ho—so ho there! Tweet, tweet, my beauty!" whistled Mr. Meldon, moving forward alongside his charge.

"Get into line. Come up, there—come on, Craddock!"

"They're off!" yelled Mrs. Meldon. "Shove along! Keep ahead of them horses! He's all right! He's done the first fence!" And the old gig went rocking and swaying down the narrow lane at a hand-gallop.

Mr. Draper, on Pioneer, had bounded away, and was going straight and strong as a bird towards the first flag fluttering in the distance. Steady and close in his wake followed the Rev. George Craddock on Crocodile. Cracking his whip and hallooing, Mr. Meldon had followed to the low bank which formed the first obstacle. Almost imperceptibly the Squire had glided over; with a jerk and a grunt Crocodile had lumbered over behind him, knocking down a barrowful of fresh-broken earth in his tracks.

Then, rolling his great head, and fixing his large eyes on the twitching tail of his smart and jaunty leader, he had, to the inexpressible relief of his owner, started gamely in pursuit.

Up goes the red coat, up goes the black coat over the next fence ; and bobbing, bobbing away, across a twenty-acre field, red and black go forward straight and true. Up they go again, red first, black a moment after, and on again in the same order—red first, black closely following.

It is all that Mr. Meldon and the rest of the horsemen can wait to see ; and indeed, in the excitement, the press, and the plunging of the crowd, they have hardly seen that properly. Galloping wild and reckless, they must catch them again on the turn by the brook.

Voiceless for want of breath, purple in the face from his exertions, Mr. Meldon draws a smoking rein at the wheel of his wife's gig, on the Ridge Road.

"I see 'em pass Carter's farm. He was all right. Close up," she shrills. "'Ere they come. Lord's sake ! He's a 'undred yards be'ind the Squire."

"The Squire wins ! The Squire wins anyhow ! Come on, sir ! The Squire !"

There is a passing shout, an approaching cheer, as they swing into view from behind the wood.

Galloping as easily as a man following hounds from cover to cover, the Squire is leading by a good many yards, if not by a hundred. Well within himself, not racing at all, Pioneer leads the way as though aware that no effort will be needed to-day.

The parson has been in some sort of trouble on the other side of the wood. His hand is up to his hat, which has been knocked over his eyes by something, as they come into sight ; and, till he gets his hand down again, Crocodile sprawls in his stride and loses ground terribly.

There is a drop into the sloping pasture, at the bottom of which the crowd marks the brook-side. The Squire almost stops on the crest of the hill as he picks his place ; then drops over neatly and collectedly, and, carefully holding his good horse together, comes quite steadily down the slope, steering straight for the turning-flag among the stunted trees by the

brook. They are to leave the flag on their left hand. The next flag is away on the top of the hill to the left—for it is uphill after the brook—and then, when once that next flag is passed, they will have a straight run for home.

Somehow, the parson and Crocodile have negotiated the drop. Mrs. Meldon has hidden her face in her hands, shivering. There has been a shout, a roar, a yell; but, when she looks up, the black coat is in its right place and the horse is on his legs.

"He's forgot; he's forgot!" gasps Mr. Meldon. "Keep to the right—keep wide!" he hoarsely shouts. "He's a-doing of it! God bless him! He's a-doing of it?"

There is blood on the parson's forehead and lips, and his face is deadly pale—those hard by him observe—as he comes thundering down the slope with a sudden and desperately reckless accession of speed.

"Steady him! Hold him steady!" screams Mrs. Meldon.

Pulling away to the right, leaving the Squire and the flag far on the left, he comes tearing on in a mad gallop. There are fewer trees by the brook-side—here on the right, where he makes his wild attack—but the bushes are thick on the bank, and the brook is certainly a few feet wider.

There is a terrified rush of people who had considered themselves well out of the way, a shrill scream of a frightened child, but a breathless hush on the hill, while the parson flies downward, across the bottom; and then, with a mighty hoist, Crocodile leaps upwards, and soars clear over the brook, bank, and bushes, and, without check or hang, strides away up the opposing slope.

"O-o—o-o-h—hoorah! Brayvo!"

There is deep-voiced roar of satisfaction from those who have witnessed the great leap at close range.

Swinging left-handed, having taken the jump at the worst place, the parson has the hill at its best place, and is going great guns for the next flag, amply repaid by this advantage

for his wide riding, while the Squire and Pioneer are struggling up the most precipitous part of the slope.

Along the firm ground of the ridge of the hill, the parson comes tearing at true Grand National pace ; and Mr. Draper, standing in his stirrups, bounds upon the ridge, and turns—fifty yards in his wake.

“Parson wins ! Parson wins for a sovereign ! Parson wins anyhow !” comes a great shout from the lane. And, clattering over the stones and gravel, reckless of life and limb, mad with excitement, with a roar at each fence as up goes the black coat, then up goes the red coat, with the hum and rattle of flying wheels drumming in their ears, and the shrill cries of Mrs. Meldon piercing them, Mr. Meldon and the other mounted spectators gallop down the ridge-road towards the Mill.

Bob, bob, bobbing, seen in a flash behind the trees and through breaks in the hedgerows, go black coat and red coat. Up goes the black coat ; up goes the red coat. They must be going at express speed, for black coat and red coat are streaking out of sight as though the gallopers in the parallel road were standing still, and black and red seem to sail over the obstacles, though you can just detect the rise and fall where the leap comes.

Up goes the black coat ; up goes the red coat. Which went up first ? Up they go again—black coat and red coat simultaneously. It must be a ding-dong race. They must be neck and neck as they rise again and disappear behind the waving arms, the carriages, and the carts of the crowd at the Mill.

There is a mighty roar from the Mill-race meadows : then cheer after cheer. Hats are flying like blackbirds above the heads of the mob, each rustic is roaring and yelling, no man is silent, as Mr. Meldon, apoplectic in face, and careless of danger to men, women, and children, gallops towards the winning-post.

“The parson ! The Squire ! The Squire ! The parson !” from a thousand throats.

"Who won? Which done it? Which come in first?" yells Mr. Meldon; but no one answers.

The parson, white as a sheet and almost fainting, in spite of Mrs. Meldon's preparation, rolls in his saddle as his hundreds of admirers flock round him; but triumph is in his eye and pride and happiness about his bleeding lips.

Flushed and hot, but with plenty of breath to chatter and joke as his friends lead him back, the young Squire sits jauntily upon his smoking steed, and certainly does not look hopelessly crushed by defeat.

The only really satisfactory result of the struggle has been found—the only bit of fun to content all the world, on calm reflection, and send all home happy, with their half-crowns and sovereigns still in all their pockets. Neck and neck over the last bank, nose and nose over the made-up hurdles in front of the carriages, and not a mouse's whisker between them as they pass the post. Colonel Gorlby of the ——shire Yeomanry, the worthy judge, has given the only possible decision—a dead heat.

He is not a riding man. He has only once been seen in breeches and boots; but Chickford loves, honours, and respects its parson, and will listen attentively, in the well-filled church, to the weekly discourse, even though the good words flow on to twenty minutes by Chickford's furtively scrutinized, hand-hidden watches—that is to say, to a time at least sufficient for the running of two Grand Nationals. And, of all the pastor's flock, there is no sheep so prominent and punctual in the Sunday fold as Mr. Charles Draper, the Squire.

ILLUSIONS

I

OF a glorious summer afternoon, high up in that big block of flats near Knightsbridge Barracks, Colonel Cecil Owen was giving one of his delightful tea-parties—with music.

A new tenor had sung; a new pianist had played; a violinist was soon to be heard scraping for the first time in London: in the hall, in the tea-room, and the room where people crowded to hear all this new music, the heat was oppressive. The host, amiable, fussy, happy, bustled to and fro: paying compliments to his clever artists, saying “shush, shush” to noisy dowagers who made too much noise over their tea, finding seats for very important dowagers—keeping an eye on all his guests. Perhaps no man ever gave such tea-parties as this grey old Colonel. He lived in London as other people live in quiet little villages, knowing everybody and known by all. Every circle was open to him; he was aristocratic, artistic, musical, literary, clubbish, even Bohemian—if you might place him by considering the company he kept. When he issued his little notes promising tea and music on such and such a day, all London seemed to come flocking, as a village flocks to see the magic lantern or listen to the lecture in the schoolroom behind the vicarage.

Above all, the good dowagers loved thus to flock, bringing their elderly unmarried daughters, their clever but eccentric nephews, their dear friend, the Italian Countess or the Spanish Duchess, who had just arrived from her native land, and who

had often heard of Colonel Owen, although she lived such a long way from Knightsbridge. The dowagers made the crowd. But in the crowd were the guests that one came to look at: famously beautiful actresses and opera singers—too famous now to be young; celebrated writers, actors, and so forth; old young men—indoors men with smooth pallid faces, sinuous gestures, extraordinarily self-possessed manners; very old men and women, whose fame had been earned so long ago that already it was almost forgotten. Beyond these were the men and women who are merely unavoidable—figures that one cannot escape from, names that one must read in every newspaper, meaningless forms on the moving background of the years.

The heat in the room was oppressive. One guest, a tall, thin man, furtively pushed the big French window and let in a little air together with the sound of carriage wheels rolling by far below in Hyde Park.

This guest was Geoffrey Elliott, not in the least famous, just a background figure—a silent man of forty, who had been standing by the window for the last half-hour, nodding and smiling when nodded to and smiled at, but not seeking conversation, listening to the chink of tea-cups, but not hastening in search of tea, hearing sweet melody of voice and string, but not applauding or saying "Thank you" otherwise than automatically. He was dark, erect, pleasant of aspect, and known to many of the guests; and, having come to the party, he should have been paying attention to the dowagers, making himself useful and agreeable. But it seemed that he was mentally quite alone in this crowded place, as if he had only come here to think; and in truth he was thinking deeply.

Gently pushing against the casement, he let in more air—hot and heavy, yet sweet and pure in comparison with the atmosphere of the room. Then, through the sheet of glass, through the iron bars of the little balcony outside, he looked down at the moving world so far below his feet, and, looking,

he thought. The shadow of the great building lay upon the carriage drive, but the tan ride was in sunlight: the plane trees were half in shadow half in light, and riders passing slowly beneath the green leaves seemed unreal, unsubstantial, glittering toys set to move by an unseen mechanism. The steady, unceasing noise of the carriage wheels seemed a sound artificially produced—a sound that might give a sense of reality only to those who heard it at a distance. Carriages close to carriages, three abreast, horses' noses almost touching carriage tails, the summer stream of wheeled traffic rolled by. Endless, inexhaustible stream. As he watched it he was thinking. Life rolling by—no, Death-in-life stalking by.

Inside the room, when he turned again, were all these dreadful, fading faces—faces to him most horrible because he had known them for twenty years, and now, in a moment he could read their message, could understand the only meaning they would ever have for him. Death-in-life. Old men, old women, who yesterday were young; painted masks that hide the horror of decay; glassy, fish-like eyes, that used to flash and glow when the fire within burned bright and strong, that now can only show the flicker and the smoke of charred, exhausted fuel. Death-in-life.

And, as he stood by the window, while a really fresh and pretty young woman played the violin, the intolerable sadness of life crept into his heart, into his brain, freezing, paralysing. Softly he pushed open the window, stepped out, and, standing on the balcony, looked down at Death-in-life stalking by—and Death beckoned him.

Steadily gazing down, as though fascinated, he leaned forward over the iron rail, a little more—a very little more still. . . .

“We must close the window, I fear.”

A hand was on his shoulder. His host was speaking to him.

“The air is most welcome, but the noise is too much. I am afraid we must shut the window again.”

And his host gently drew him back : saved his life, and then introduced him to a harridan to take in to tea.

“Good-bye, Mr. Elliott,” said an amiable, smiling dowager presently. “Do come and see me. One never sees you now. You have become quite a recluse. Too bad—at your age. You don’t even tell us where a letter will find you. I have written to you at your club two or three times—but you never answer. Too bad.”

In the golden sunlight he walked away from the musical party, through the crowded park, away from the rolling wheels, the brightly dressed women, the black solemn men ; and, as he walked, he thought. Alone, as far as he could get away from the well-dressed mob, he sat thinking of it. From his seat in the shade of a tree he looked out into the warm sunlight and saw it. Death-in-life.

Forty dream-years, and this is what it has come to : the beckoning hand and the swift certainty that one must follow it.

Why ? Because he stood alone in the world ? That could not be the reason. Thousands of selfish men of his age sunned themselves in the thought that they were self-centred, that fate and their own hands had built them safe self-prisons from which they could never escape, but into which no danger could ever break. He knew himself to be selfish—very selfish. In the beginning he had greatly loved two people : his mother, who had been dead for years ; and his younger brother, who, though living, was so completely lost to him that nothing of the old love remained. The others—married sisters, old friends—were nothing, less than nothing to him. He was absolutely alone—without even a servant. He possessed a bare competence and had lived the sordid life of his class, on five hundred a year—good clubs, staying about in country-house, travelling on the Continent, the militia once—debts always, in spite of rigid economy. For over a year he had been living in a common lodging-house—what might almost be called workmen’s

dwellings—near the King's Road, Chelsea, rigidly economizing, giving his address to no one, quietly pulling himself straight financially. But those sordid little troubles with regard to means need not worry him. They were nothing. No money could help him. Millions and millions of pounds could make no difference to him. The knowledge that all the gold ever minted into coin was of a sudden his would not have gladdened his heart, just now on the iron balcony, or lifted the oppressive sense of weariness that had fallen on him in the crowded room. Then why?

His health? Nothing to complain of there. Not what you would call a strong man, but active, wiry—able to bear such fatigue as had come in his way; amateur soldiering with its field days, route-marching, etc.; some hunting, some shooting, a little mountain-climbing; and the late hours, supper-parties, night clubs, etc., etc., of London. It had troubled him, as years passed, that he could not carry flesh. He was lean, had told doctors that he was very lean. But doctors had reassured him: he need not distress himself; there was nothing abnormal, no lack of vitality, nothing *wrong*. But the something wrong might have come in a moment. That was his thought now. Brain mischief? Could it be possible that in the stuffy, airless room some tiny speck of ruin had been wrought in his brain? Fibre, cells—something ruptured—some new-created physical basis for the new strange thoughts? He was no physiologist, but he thought now with wondering doubt of things he had read in books or heard men speak of.

No, it was not that—nothing of that sort. Perhaps it was, after all, no more than this: the thought-explosion of slowly accumulated weariness—the weariness of dull routine, of the sameness of one's days, one's surroundings, and one's lack of change or adventure. Then the cure for his trouble should be easy of attainment. He must fly away, be done with the life of cities—close rooms, pushing elbows, chattering voices. He must go to Nature, wild scenes, wide spaces, open skies. That would be the thing—break with the old, take up the new.

But, even as he thought of it, a feeling of impotence overcame him. He had scarcely strength to lift himself from his chair. What should he do with the struggle for life in rough countries? Too late. Too late for that—and, as he sauntered on beneath the trees, he thought of dead men lying in desert places: saw them, solitary wanderers in untrodden wastes, feeble creatures like himself who had pitted their waning force against Nature's vast and merciless strength in strange lands thousands of miles from home. He could see them, with upturned, sightless eyes—frail shells from which the life had been beaten out by waterless plains, cloudless skies, fruitless shrubs. Day after day they had suffered raging hunger, burning thirst: then had come delirium: they had walked in dreamland, in ghostland, till perhaps, at the last, there had been a flicker of sane thought; and, understanding their impotence and failure, they had lain themselves down to die.

Pity for these dead men—as languidly he walked on—filled his heart with warm suffused pain, filled his eyes for a minute and more with warm smarting tears. Pity for all who suffered throbbed wide in his brain till slowly it narrowed to a poignantly intense self-pity. How cruel that fate should punish him thus, what a monstrous injustice that he should be so unhappy! All the world was beautiful in the golden evening light—even this common London park was beautiful, most beautiful. The white bridge glittered; upon the shining water boats gently glided; girls' voices sounded a pleasant music; above the dark masses of the heavy summer foliage, white houses showed fantastic towers and cupolas. But in the yellow haze, in the deepening shadows beneath the trees, far and near, high and low, over vivid colours and moving forms, there was sadness.

He had felt the sadness of life before—something invisible—a presence in gay scenes—what all feel—but not *this*. He must go away—farther than one may go by crossing oceans and traversing continents?

Slowly his thought deepened, steadied itself, flowed strong,

for a little while at least, into resolved purpose. He must rouse himself, make some sort of fight and throw off the trouble that possessed him, or he must of settled plan do what from sudden impetus he had nearly done this afternoon.

II

He was walking briskly when he neared his home. The air was cooler now ; people were breathing freely after the oppressive heat of the long day ; about Sloane Square the tops of omnibuses were besieged by shop-girls, clerks, and salesmen returning from their work, while broughams and cabs carried the well-to-do shop customers to their dinner-parties. He walked more briskly. He would dress as fast as he could, pick a good hansom, and dash off to his club ; have a late but comfortable dinner, sit talking at the club if he happened to meet pleasant talkers, or stroll out again and look in to see a ballet at one of the big music halls. The trouble was gone from him completely as he reached his home.

It was a humble, almost an abject, home for a well-dressed man about town. A large house, outwardly plain and forbidding as a workhouse or penitential institution ; inside the big door, a bare hall, the glass window that opened into the porter's office, and, before you, the stone stairs, distempered walls with the painted names of the permanent lodgers—clerks, dressmakers, shop-managers, etc.—and the numbers of the single rooms that, whenever vacant, were at the disposal of shop-assistants, etc., or any respectable person who cared to pay eight shillings down for a week certain. Mr. Geoffrey Elliott's name did not appear on the wall. He had taken his two rooms—Flat 24, fourth floor, at the top of the building—with their furniture, for three months, from a Bohemian, out-at-elbows artist-friend, one Henry Fenn. No busy dowager, beating up recruits for card-parties, could find him here : it was a safe, cheap shelter for his luggage and his wardrobe, and

in three months with replenished funds he could, of course, return to the more expensive lodgings of clubland. But he found himself so comfortable in this remote nest of plebeian toilers that he stayed on for another three months, and then bought the furniture from hard-up Fenn, and henceforth paid his rent direct to the landlord's representative in the porter's office. The arrangement saved him from the effort that would be necessary if he moved back to clubland, and for a year and more he had perhaps unconsciously been shirking the slightest effort.

Here, in this big house, life was easy ; he was safe from all intrusions ; no friend could come prying and boring : if the fancy for complete solitude was upon him—and such a craving for peace and quiet had very often in the last year made itself felt—he could indulge it tranquilly, could sit brooding in his chair, or muddling over old letters, old papers, old magazines, could think hour after hour of days that were gone. All day, when the workers were abroad, a splendid silence held the house—a grateful, refreshing, nerve-soothing silence, unbroken sometimes for long brooding hours. There were days on which he loved this long pause wherein he was disturbed by no sounds of footsteps on the stairs, doors opening and shutting, far-off voices growling or laughing. He would look up with a fretful exclamation when again the stillness was shattered by stupid noise. In a room on the floor below him was a great peace-breaker—a tall, pale girl who had a type-writing machine. Generally she was out, but some days she worked at home. One never knew. Unexpectedly the hateful click-click, clack-clack would begin—just under one's feet, and one would be forced to listen to the faint, uncertain, irritating noise ; and the longer one listened, the more clearly came the little tinkle of the bell, the jolt and rattle of the abominable untiring mechanism. She worked far into the night sometimes, but at night he rather liked the sound. It was by day that it annoyed him—annoyed him so extremely that there had been mornings when he was tempted to go down and buy from her a respite :

to knock at her door and say, "Miss Maynard,"—that was her name—"here is a sovereign. I engage you for the day *not* to do it."

Poor girl—of course he never told her how sadly she worried him ; he was sorry for her really, and bade her good morning or good evening, when he met her on the stairs, quite politely, even cheerfully. The big house had been built for lonely people like her, not for lonely people like him. She was not ill-looking, and her voice was refined in tone ; she spoke, when spoken to, without embarrassment or hesitation and without the least friendliness, just as neighbours should speak to neighbours, with cold civility.

Not by any means an ill-favoured girl of twenty-nine, thirty, or even more ; with pale eyes, pale hair, the signs of what might in other circumstances have become beauty of figure, features, expression ; but all had been washed out, worn out, effaced, it seemed, by the stress or monotony of her working life.

This evening, coming up the stairs, he met her ; and was grateful to her for her presence, for her nod of recognition, and for the noise she made in shutting her door.

As he climbed the stone steps, his trouble had returned to him. Outside, in the open street, he had been all right ; but now, in a moment, it had come back—with a new sensation of strangeness, vagueness, unreality. At this hour the house should have been noisy, full of the noise of life : voices growling or laughing in many rooms, footsteps on every floor ; and yet to-night the stairway to the third floor was silent as the grave. The gas had not yet been lit ; through narrow windows on each landing one could see a patch of yellow sky, but no light seemed to enter. Grey shadows pervaded the house—shadows that deepened, blackened, seemed to change into black walls closing round him as he mounted. It was as if he had suddenly found himself on the narrow winding stairs of some old deserted tower, and fear and doubt had seized him, and he dared not mount higher in the darkness, lest he should encounter

a gap in the stone steps or the stone wall, and, stumbling, fall through it to destruction hundreds of feet below.

He had paused irresolute, breathless, straining his ears for a sound to break the spell, when she came out of her room and spoke to him.

"Oh, Miss Maynard? Good evening. How dark it is. Why don't they light the gas on the stairs?"

The spell was broken. In a moment he was himself again.

"Let me get you some matches."

"Thanks awfully. I wish you would."

She went back into her room, brought him a box of matches, and he lit the public gas jet; and for a minute stood talking to her.

"I'll put the matches outside your door as I come down. You are going out, I see."

"Yes," she said, "for a little air. How dreadfully hot it has been."

"Hasn't it?"

"What I call a tiring day."

"Exactly. I have been doing nothing, and yet I feel tired. And you—you have been working all day?"

"Oh yes," and she smiled. "In business they can't take the weather into consideration—and stop work at eighty in the shade. It would be very nice to have a rule of that sort. Good night."

"Good night, Miss Maynard. Many thanks for the matches. I won't forget to put them back—by your door."

"Thank you."

"Oh, Miss Maynard——" She was going down the stairs, and he had followed her to the top step. "I forgot to ask. Where is everybody? Do you notice how quiet everything is?"

"I suppose they have all gone out. It is too hot to remain indoors."

There was coldness in her voice—the neighbourly tone was lost. She would not linger and talk with fellow-lodgers.

A lonely, proud, pale toiler—a tall, slim girl who should have been pretty and petted ; who should have been slowly courted, slowly won, and long-loved ; whose light and fire and joyous life should have been carefully fed, jealously tended ; who must be cold and dim and vague as the grey shadow of herself on the stone wall now always.

“ Yes, that’s it. I hope you’ll have a pleasant walk. Good night, Miss Maynard.”

Then he went upstairs, entered his silent retreat, lighted the gas in both rooms, hastily changed his clothes ; while dressing, looked at himself in the glass, and saw it once again. Death-in-life. Wasted muscles, shrunk calves—a misshapen, feeble body to be hurriedly hidden by clothes—not a live man. Forty years gone, and this is what it has come to. Then why wait for what is coming ?

His club was one of the noble, old-fashioned establishments in Pall Mall. Once it pleased him to know that, while still young, he had been put upon its list of members. He liked the men he met there—older than himself, but friendly, smiling good-natured companions in idle hours. He liked the clubhouse, its solid pomp and comfortable magnificence, huge doors swinging on smooth hinges, marble pavements and velvet pile carpets, frigid statuary, but soft, slumber-wooing couches,—well-cooked food, well-kept wine, well-trained servants.

To-night nearly all the windows stood open in the big dining-room, and electric fans were working in niches beneath the gilded cornice ; but the air was warm, heavy, exhausted. Elderly servants in plain dress-clothes, younger servants in black silk stockings with gold garters to their breeches, moved to and fro slowly and noiselessly ; a faint steam and odour of hot meats hung about the screens by the service doors ; the yellow light fell softly and feebly from small crystal bulbs in the lofty ceiling ; there were black shadows between the painted columns that divided the room—shadows rendered darker by the bright circles of light thrown by strong lamps about the

tables where men sat eating and drinking. It was late—nearly half-past nine : only ten or a dozen tables were occupied in all the big room.

On each side of him tables were empty. He knew all the diners by sight—old *habituals*, the members to whom club means home ; and one or two had nodded to him ; but none seemed to want his company or indeed to wish to talk to any one. He ordered his dinner—good food, good wine—and, looking about the room, tried to wait with patience.

But suddenly disgust, almost nausea, seized him. All appetite had gone. He would not eat or drink in here. The dust from the thick carpets seemed to rise to his nostrils ; the tainted, vitiated air seemed poisonous ; the warmth and the silence were stifling one. And once again he saw it—Death-in-life. The odour of decay was in the place. It was a vast tomb, a house of death, really. And he looked down the long room, recognizing the signs that till now he had never understood : bloodless hands, bald heads gleaming as white bone beneath the lamps, faces of parchment, lifeless hair,—round-paunched men on slender legs tottering away from the lamp-lit tables, plethoric men gorging as insects gorge in the shadow of their doom, men like himself quite alone in the deepening shadows.

It is too ugly—too ugly to go on with.

He did not dine ; he did not go to a Music Hall : he walked away from the club, past the old palace, into St. James's Park, and sauntered slowly homeward on the broad path beneath the trees. He had failed to find talkers in the club smoking-room : he was failing in his resolve to make a fight of it. The sense of impotence was upon him as he came out of the quiet park, and, passing beneath the wall of the other palace, reached the lamp-lit shop-windows again. Impotent, unable to struggle, certain to fail ;—and he stood outside a chemist's window, vaguely wondering.

Poison ? Which ? What should he ask for ? Would they

sell it to him? They would inquire why he wanted it; they would make endless difficulties;—and, with his hands in his pockets, he lounged on, thinking of all the difficulties he would have to surmount. It would have been easy this afternoon—just a loss of balance, a head-first plunge over an iron balustrade. An easy chance missed—not to be retrieved. Now, nothing but doubt and difficulty in accomplishing his purpose.

He thought of it in words—as he strolled through Eaton Square. “Yes, I think I will commit suicide—or, rather, I think I *must* commit suicide. I don’t think I have any choice now—but it will be very difficult—dreadfully difficult.”

Then suddenly there came immense relief of mind. An inspiration—memory, working for him, gave him back a thought that should have presented itself at once, without a moment’s delay. His old revolver! The Webley Service revolver of his militia days. He should find somewhere, neatly packed away in one of his trunks, the revolver and a tin box with cartridges. Government ammunition—fifty rounds originally, and fifteen or twenty unused, stuffed down in the box with rag and crumpled newspaper:—he remembered packing the box and putting it away. Immense relief came to him with this thought of the weapon lying ready to his hand. The sensation of being overdriven began to fade; the strain and torment was relaxed: no hurry now. The thing could be done at leisure—above all, without crushing difficulties: any time to-night, to-morrow morning—perhaps even later.

Was escape after all possible? No. Walking across the open space in Sloane Square, he tested his thought, offered himself the fight again, and found the thing inevitable. With the clear thought of escape, the oppression, the trouble, the unbearable sense of helplessness came rushing back. With the thought of the revolver, he was at peace again.

Alone in his rooms he hastily dragged out his boxes, unlocked, cut cords, threw back lids, littered the floor with garments, books, old photographs, old pipes, spurs, boots, bundles of old letters—the relics of all his old life tumbling

about him in confusion; but, at last, found what he was seeking : the revolver and the cartridge box. Yes, all ready—no rust; clean, bright, in working order; and the brass-cased cartridges, with the grease still on them. He gave a sigh of contentment, and sat down to rest and to think.

He sat for a long time, leaning back in his comfortable chair, with half-closed eyes, his mind at rest, his arms hanging loose—his whole attitude that of a man exhausted by excessive physical, and not mental, fatigue. Then, languidly rising, he took up the revolver, brought out six of the smeared cartridges and loaded it, and laid it on the table in the middle of the room. Henceforth, as he wandered aimlessly about the room, his eye was drawn to it persistently.

The litter he had made seemed to keep his thought wandering; each thing that he looked at seemed to have the power of changing the drift of his thought—only the revolver was a fixed point, something solid, steady, that could hold his thought.

Hour after hour passed while he muddled with his disturbed odds and ends, picking up things, putting them down, trying to repack the trunks, seeking to tidy the room—accomplishing nothing that he attempted. All his life was showing itself to him, scrappily, without order or logical sequence—now one year, now another, people, places, written and spoken words. Seeing and hearing his past thus, he thought of drowning men and of all that they are said to recollect in the few minutes of their agony. Drowning! How easy that must be—and he glanced at the revolver and shivered.

The reason why he must be done with life was that everything had dropped out of his life. Seeing these pictures of the past, he could understand why he was doomed. All had gone from him—pleasure, hope, love. All that builds up life had slipped away. Perhaps he was strong enough in frame and organs to live for another thirty years. That was no matter—he was a dead man really. It was not hallucination; he had not fallen a prey to a dominating idea : he had allowed

the logical weariness of life to take possession of him. But the necessity was flagrantly cruel, hideously unjust. Since the world began no man had suffered such injustice from fate.

Then he thought of how easily he might have been saved from this creeping, all-embracing, over-powering death-in-life. For the second time, he wept as he thought of it.

His brother—his once loved younger brother—could have saved him. Far away, at his fine house in Hampshire, no doubt, at this hour Jack was sleeping by the side of his fat, rich wife, never stirring in his sleep, never muttering a cry of horror or grief because of this abominable tragedy. How cruel, how wickedly, inconceivably cruel. Jack would not weep for him, would say he was mad. Yet—heavens and earth—how deeply, in boyhood, in early manhood, he had loved Jack. But no love could hold this younger brother—he had changed beyond belief. He had married for money, become hard, practical, utterly devoid of sympathy. When the two met, the younger spoke to the elder with scarcely concealed contempt. “Well, Geoff, old chap—slugging on as usual, I suppose? Crawling about town still? Good Lord, man, what has come to you—why don’t you rouse yourself?” That was the sort of way Jack talked—without the least understanding sympathy. Because he led an open-air life, was a country squire, a J.P., a D.L., a little local potentate, he thought all men—including his brother—contemptible who had other tastes and other aims. He was snobbish, even, in his wife-found prosperity—seeming always to dread that Geoffrey, by defiance of convention, by an imprudent marriage, or by loss of money, would one day bring disgrace upon him. He would talk to Geoffrey, with ridiculous deference, of “the head of the family”—the cousin-baronet :—echoing the sentiments of this pompous ass, and reporting his anxious inquiries. “Old Sir John spoke very strongly, Geoff. He says that he hopes for the credit of the family you will look out for a suitable wife and settle down reputably,” and so on. “Remember,” said Jack, another time, “there are only three

lives between us"; and the elder brother laughed inwardly. "Four lives, Master Jack," he said to himself—"if you don't mind counting mine. That means that if Sir John and his sons would kindly go out in a boat and be drowned—and I die childless—as I suppose I shall—you could plaster the red hand on my lady's carriages."

"Well," he said now, as he muddled about the room, "I'm doing what I can for you, Jack. I am removing one of those four lives."

Love could have saved him—but all the love was gone. And he thought with unutterable sadness and self-pity of what he had been—once. Gay, happy, facile in disposition—not in the least selfish then—in all things worthy of love.

Women had cared for him—had been willing to give him all their love. Looking back, he could hear their voices, see their eyes gazing at him mournfully—gracious, yielding forms, waiting with outstretched arms, standing in soft light with dark shadows behind them. They were all lovely and love-impelling, in that gentle light—the fading light of youth. Thinking of them, and turning again to his fixed point—the cruel weapon of release—he shivered from head to feet.

How many! Very many, in twenty years—the women he had lost, insanely let go, pushed from him without regret, without one warning thought of his future need. Now, any one of these women—were she here—could save him from his doom.

Any woman might save him.

A longing for help came to him. Horror and revulsion seized him. Escape—even now? He would go out into the streets, pick up the first woman he could find, and with her help fight against the insufferable cruelty of his doom.

But no, he *cannot*. Such an effort was impossible. He could only sit and think of it. Too late—he should have thought of that before. The short night was far advanced; the streets would be empty of life; all the house, all the great town was sleeping. The last sound of life in the house had

ceased just now. The faint rattle and clicking of the type-machine on the floor below had been the last sound.

Light came from beneath her door. As he stood listening outside the door, he heard her footstep. Then he tapped softly on the door panels, and called her name.

"Miss Maynard—I want to speak to you."

"What is it?"

She had answered, after a pause, in a scared voice. Now she came to the door, drew back a bolt, and opened the door a few inches.

"Mr. Elliott—is that you? What is it?"

"I want to speak to you—I want you to help me. I am in great trouble. May I come in?"

She hesitated before she answered. Then she spoke breathlessly—with fear in her words.

"Yes. Wait a minute, and you shall come in," and she closed the door. He heard her moving about the room, surmised that she had been half undressed and was now putting on her clothes again. He waited patiently until she re-opened the door, widely this time, to admit him. The bed was covered with the type-written folios that she had just finished; there were papers all about the machine on the table; and on the chest of drawers he saw a spirit-lamp, kettle, and tea-cup. She had been working, long and hard, to complete some heavy task, and now the well-earned supper of tea and biscuits was in preparation. It was past two. To-morrow at seven she would be up and getting ready to begin another day of toil. She looked white, tired, frightened, and years older than as he had always seen her hitherto—in her hat and walking dress.

"Now, what is it?"

"I am in very great trouble."

"What can I do? What is it you want?"

She was deadly white and her hand shook a little. She had drawn back to let him pass her; and, as he came to the

table, she moved again to the door, pushed it still wider open, and stood just inside the threshold, watching him intently.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "Shall I go down and wake the porter? Shall I send him for a doctor?"

"No. I don't think I'm ill," and he pulled the vacant chair from the table and sat down wearily.

"Then what can I do? What is it you want?"

She came a little way from the door—her scared eyes seeking his averted face. As though instinctively, she had taken her position between him and the open door.

"I want your help," he repeated.

"Tell me what I can do," she said firmly, "and I will do it."

"I want you to come upstairs—and stay with me—and prevent me from killing myself."

"Killing yourself—what do you mean?"

Slowly he turned his face and his eyes met hers—eagerly questioning him.

"Come upstairs—and I'll show you. There's a loaded revolver—and now I don't want to use it—but I must use it unless you will come."

"You—you say this to frighten me."

"No. On my honour, No."

Her eyes were full of fear, her lips were as white as her face, and her hands shook.

"Then I think—I think you must be very ill. I—I'll go out myself and bring a doctor."

"No, a doctor couldn't help me. I am quite sane——"

"Yes," she said. "I am sure you are. But you are ill without knowing it. Please let me go for a doctor."

"If you go, I shall be dead before the doctor comes. . . . Don't be afraid of me. I am not mad."

"Very well. Yes. I—I'll come up with you . . . if you'll promise to let me take away the revolver."

"I can't do that unless you promise to stay with me."

"Very well," she said resolutely. "I promise. Now

come ; ” and she went to him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

He held her hand as together they climbed the stone steps, and he could feel that she was cold and trembling, but she showed no fear of him now. It was as if she had finally pierced the confused tangle of his thoughts, read his innermost mystery, understood him ; and from her there flowed already peace and calm and respite from all his trouble.

It was as if he had in truth been ill and this was the wise nurse in whose charge he had placed himself. Upstairs, in his room, she spoke to him as a nurse speaks to a sick child : gently, soothingly, but authoritatively.

“ Now I must take this away. Is it really loaded ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Then you must unload it carefully,” and, while she still held the weapon, he obeyed her.

“ Now give me those things—the loadings ; ” and he obeyed her.

“ There are other loadings in there,” and she pointed to the tin box of cartridges. “ Give me all you have. Remember your promise. I want to know that there are none left up here.”

“ There are no more.”

“ And the pistol is safe now ? There is nothing now to make it explode ? ”

“ No.”

“ Very well. Then I’ll take it away.”

“ But you’ll come back ? ”

“ Yes, I have given you my word. I won’t break it.”

The trouble was fast going from him. It had been a true instinct : this woman—any woman—could save him. When she returned in a minute or two, he roused himself with a start, looked at her and smiled. She had taken the horror from the room—she was lifting the weight of the vast burden that had been crushing him. She too smiled.

"How kind you are," he whispered. "I want to tell you all about it—why I felt I must do it."

"Yes," she said, whispering also, although all the house slept and no one would hear their voices even if they raised them. "You shall tell me everything—but not to-night. To-morrow. You must go to bed and rest now."

Then she asked him such questions as a doctor asks of a new patient, and he told her, in reply, that it was a long time since he had drunk or eaten.

"Then, while you undress, I will go down again and fetch you some food—I have some milk and biscuits. I'll come back and wait in this room. When you are in bed, call to me and I'll bring it in. Then I will read you to sleep."

"But if I sleep—you won't leave me?"

"No. I'll stay with you till the morning—till I hear people stirring."

She made him eat the biscuits and drink the milk, and then sat by his bedside and read aloud to him in a low equal voice; and after a time he slept.

He had been holding her hand, but slowly his fingers loosened, slipped away. Watching him, she saw that his forehead was covered with perspiration; he was shivering; he moved restlessly, muttered and moaned in his sleep, but did not waken. Then his sleep became deeper and deeper till he lay motionless, soundless, as a dead man.

It was broad daylight before she too slept. The book tumbled from her lap; her head drooped, and fell forward on her breast. The gay sunshine came through the curtained window and filled half the room with dancing flame; birds chirped and sang in trees above the street; the early traffic had begun, and the rolling wheels and beating hoofs sounded strong and clear in the fresh morning air. Another dull working day had begun, and still she slept as though no thought of life would ever wake her.

Half the room was in sunlight, in golden fire, and half was in grey shadow; rainbow shafts struck the foot of the bed, but

the window curtain kept the sunbeams from the sleeping man and woman ; and, motionless in the shadow, they seemed not sleeping but dead.

III

WHEN he woke he was alone. It was past noon. Within the house the warm midday hush had fallen ; all the workers were abroad.

He lay thinking, with ever-increasing wonder, of yesterday—a long, ugly dream that had left him very tired. Slowly he traced out the hours—a waking nightmare. Incredible. A child frightened by the darkness, clamouring for assistance in the middle of the night—incredible ! But the girl—the kind girl downstairs—she must of course have thought him mad. She will have been talking to people—telling all the world of her adventure. At any minute some prying doctor may arrive to question and harass him.

He dressed hastily. He must at once see his fellow-lodger, thank her, apologize to her—somehow make things straight with her. But Miss Maynard was not in her room : silence and a locked door met him there. She had gone out—the porter told him—at her usual hour ; the key of her room was hanging on the rack ; the porter could not say when she would return. She would come in most days at about four or five, and then stay in her room till the evening. Miss Maynard had not spoken to the porter of last night. Looking at the man's incurious face, Mr. Elliott was sure of that ; and his thought was full of gratitude. It would have been horrible if she had given this common man some warning message. In imagination he had framed words for her. "I think the gentleman upstairs is not safe to be left alone. You should keep an eye on him, and, if possible, communicate with his friends." That was the sort of thing he dreaded most of all.

He went out, breakfasted, and came back ; asked for news of her two or three times in the morning ; wandered aimlessly

in the immediate neighbourhood ; then went up to his own rooms and sat waiting for her through the drowsy afternoon, brooding, dozing, thinking of her, awake or half asleep, longing to see her again.

At last, about six o'clock, he heard a footstep on the stairs : she had returned, and of her own accord was coming up to see him.

"Well," she said, "how are you? All right to-day?"

"I want to thank you—and to tell you everything."

"Yes, tell me. I would like to hear all your troubles. You know, when one speaks freely of one's troubles, they often seem easier to bear."

She had kept his secret. She had spoken to no one. His heart over-flowed with gratitude.

"You saved my life," he said eagerly. "All day I have been thinking of you—and at first I was mean enough to think I would try to make light of it—say I was half joking—only upset, not seriously intending it. But I couldn't have lied to you. Now you are here with me, I know I must have told you the truth."

"I promise you may trust me. Tell me everything."

They sat talking for a long time—more than an hour ; and again he was conscious of the peace and comfort that seemed to flow from her. He told her of his sensations, thoughts, vague fears—above all, of the intolerable sadness that had overborne him. He could talk to her, it seemed, as he had never yet talked to any one. She alone, of all the people he had ever known, seemed to understand his thought and to measure the pain of it.

The relief of unburdening himself was so great that nothing could stop him now. Once or twice she tried to check him, but he must pour out the confession of his weakness and distress. He was by temperament a too silent, reticent man, and now it was as if, when once he had felt the solace or abandoning all reserve, he must exhaust the stream of egoism that had broken loose.

"Yes," she said, when at last he ceased speaking. "But now you must put all that behind you."

"If I only could——"

"Of course you can."

She was pale, weak, weary from too much work and too little sleep—perhaps too little food; and yet strength as well as peace came from her. There were dark circles round her eyes; her face, in the shadow of her black hat, looked pinched and thin; she looked poor, neglected, colourless; but her smile transfigured her, made her beautiful, because of its infinite pity and sympathy.

"You must be brave," she said, smiling at him. "It is cowardly to give way. Everybody feels what you have felt—women most of all—at a certain age. Constantly. I myself——"

"Ah, but not what I did. It never goes as far with others as it did with me. On my honour, I have not exaggerated. I believe it must be what the doctors call *obsession*."

She laughed and shook her head.

"They may call it what they like. It is cowardly to give way to it."

Then she told him that she must leave him now: she had still more work to do before she went out for her evening stroll.

"But when shall I see you again? May I come out with you? When you go, let me come with you."

Yes, she said; he might stroll with her to the Chelsea embankment.

"And first, do let us have dinner together somewhere—at some quiet little restaurant."

No, she said, she could not do that. She would not dine with him, but he might walk with her.

Then he pleaded for her "friendship."

"Will you let us be friends—real friends? Will you always be my friend? You don't know—even now—how much it will mean to me. Be my friend—and help me."

"Yes, if you wish it. I would like to help you if I could."

In this manner—as by solemn treaty—their friendship began. For three long days they were friends, and then the friendship came to an end.

During these three days, he realized more and more clearly what she was doing for him. She was lifting all his dark thoughts, bringing back to him something of the light of youth, unlocking his heart for him, making him sound again and almost self-reliant. It was wonderful to feel, wonderful to think of. The horror has gone: she has banished the sadness.

In each hour his gratitude was growing: he was never weary of telling her how great was his debt.

And she too was changing hour by hour. As he walked with her of an evening and looked at her face, now in the glare of lamplit shops, now in the dusk by the quiet river, his heart beat fast in surprise and pleasure. He had been sorry for her because she was pallid, commonplace, uninteresting: he must have been blind. In truth she was beautiful—with a sweet proud beauty that sprang from deep wells of kindness, pity, and courage. It was as if scales had fallen from his eyes, and he was beginning to see her as she really was; or as if all the dull years were slipping back and she was fast changing again to what she had really been long, long before he had ever seen her.

After these walks she would come up to his sitting-room and remain with him while he smoked a pipe, moved to and fro, showing her books, photographs, talking to her happily, easily—with myriads of friendly words strengthening their friendly bond. He would keep her with him by any pretext, implore her to stay for another quarter of an hour, another ten minutes, still one more minute. He was not yet quite free from dread that, if she left him, sadness might come back. It was only when she reminded him of her work on the morrow, that he would cease to be importunate.

"Yes—yes. You must go—at once. What a selfish wretch I am. Go now—sleep well. Good night ;" and he would follow her on the landing, lean over the balustrade, and watch her going down—would stand and listen till he heard her door close, and then, with a sigh, go back to his empty room and sit thinking of her.

Was it what the doctors call obsession—another sort of trouble to replace the old trouble ? Certainly in these three days, awake or asleep, he could not escape from the thought of her.

Waiting for her in the empty room, he would feel an intense longing for her company even though he had been with her only a few minutes ago. Thus, on the third evening, after their stroll by the river, he waited and the longing for her throbbed in all his veins, ran like fire about his brain.

"I thought you were never coming——"

He had opened his door, was standing at the top of the stairs. He had been unable to wait for her on the threshold, must go out to meet her—and his voice shook, his heart leaped and raced at the sight of her pale face and friendly eyes.

Then, as she entered the room, he took her in his arms, held her with passionate strength.

"Oh, be kind to me."

She made no resistance, shivered beneath his embrace, and there was a sob after the whispered words. That was all. "Be kind to me." He never forgot the words.

This was the end of their friendship—henceforth they were lovers.

She was happy, and he, for a little while at least, was radiantly happy. She had made him sound and sane in body and mind ; she had swept away the last trace of the horror ; it would never, could never, return. He was self-reliant again, able to fend for himself, strong enough to guard and hold the woman he loved.

How had either lived so long without the other? That was their question now. Watching her now, he thought of fading flowers which lie forgotten, neglected, dying; but which may yet recover all their strength and beauty. That was what had happened to her. She was a human flower.

Though he had spoken so much of his past, she would not speak of hers—except the last two years of it. He understood that she, like himself, had no steady sequence of golden days to look back upon.

“My happiness,” she told him once, “was for a little while when I was a child. I was in the care of an old aunt—at Twickenham. Such a pretty house—in a garden by the river, and every one was kind to me. I was very happy then—or now I think I was.”

“And your people—your father and mother—were they dead?”

“Not then. They are dead now. They have been dead a long time.”

That was the only glimpse of her youth that she ever gave him. She would tell him no more. She was his now—did it matter what had gone before? Yet he often wondered. With his arm about her, listening to her soft, sweet voice, he wondered. Well-born? Well educated undoubtedly—with the accent and intonation that can only be caught and retained permanently by those who have been reared among what the world calls ladies and gentlemen. A lady in thought and feeling—a lady also by race and descent? Did it matter? Perhaps one day she would tell him all, show him the stages of life that had brought her from guarding hands and friendly gracious faces to solitude and toil in this house of lonely workers.

Of her work itself she would always talk freely—nothing to hide there. She was acting as more or less permanent secretary or clerk to a business man who was also a man of pleasure. She went nearly every morning, wrote the man's letters for him, copied, transcribed, typed for him till the man's

luncheon hour, and then was dismissed. For the rest of the day, and for much of the night sometimes, as he knew, she worked as outside hand for a type-writing office in Holborn. Much of the afternoon was wasted in going to and fro, waiting at the office for manuscripts. She was busy now, earning money rapidly, because this was the good time. August and September, and perhaps half October, formed the bad time—when you could earn nothing, or very little. You must always put by enough before July was over to carry you through the bad time. If you failed to do so, it was a bad look-out for you.

“Now it shall be good time always. No more bad times for my Violet.”

But she would take no presents from him.

He would have stopped the work at once, made her *his* secretary and paid her a fabulous wage for idleness, bought her the ease and rest that she should always have enjoyed. But she changed whenever he spoke of giving her money. A moment ago she was soft warm flesh and blood, and now she was pale, unyielding marble.

“Geoffrey, I don’t want it. And besides—if there were no other reason—I know that you are poor yourself, or you would not live here.”

But, as he protested, it was a mere freak of his to live here. He was rich—had five hundred a year—more money than he could possibly use. It was only selfish extravagance that sometimes had made him feel poor.

No bangles, hats, or dresses—and he would have loved to dress her so prettily : shower upon her all the pretty things that were hers by right of her pretty face—all, all the things in which women delight, and of which she had been too long deprived. But she would take none of them.

“No. I can’t. But, Geoffrey, are you ashamed of me?”

“Ashamed!”

“I mean—when you are walking with me, are you ashamed because I am not better dressed? Do I disgrace you by my shabbiness?”

In truth she was not shabby. She had spent her poor little earnings on new frocks and hats, had striven to do him honour.

Then he protested. "Ashamed of you. My own Violet." He loved her, he admired her, he was proud of her.

In her great loneliness love had come to her and she gloried in the love. She had no regrets, no repinings, never questioned him as to the future.

"You love me—that is all I ask."

And again he would tell her how much he loved her.

"You don't think lightly of me—or my love? That's all I ask."

Then she told him that each had needed the other. Her need had been as strong as his. She had been most lonely and unhappy, and often thinking of him, often "supposing things."

"What sort of things?"

"Well—supposing just what happened :—if *you* were lonely and unhappy, and wanted me. Almost directly I saw you, I began to think of it. I always spoke coldly to you—on purpose—not to let you guess; but I always thought of it. I had been thinking of it that very night, when you came down. That was what startled me—frightened me so dreadfully. It was like an answer to my thought—when your voice came. . . .

"All that you said, that night, I seemed to have heard ages ago. I seemed to know each word that you would say next. . . . And while you were asleep—I kissed you; and, in my thought, I gave myself to you then—if you wanted me."

The sunlit weeks were gliding. As he sauntered in the streets, he could see that the London season was dying fast. Cabs and station broughams came laden with luggage from the fine new houses about Sloane Square; smart *mammas* with *débutante* daughters were flying away—to Goodwood, Cowes, etc., etc., wherever the smart young men had flown: even the heavy dowagers were on the wing. A slower flight, theirs—to Homburg, Carlsbad, Harrogate—wherever sober, elderly young

men may be found to walk by one's bath chair or make up one's rubber after dinner.

"You know the sort of companionable creature I mean—really nice men, like that Geoffrey Elliott used to be until he disappeared. Too bad of him."

He had done with the dowagers. Season or no season, it was all one to him. He went no more to his club. He rarely glanced at a newspaper. His days were full of brooding joy.

Soon he too would fly—but far away from dowagers and *débutantes*. August was at hand; in the second week of the month he was to carry away with him his secret love, his new solace, and his new strength.

It would be like a honeymoon: like that bridal tour of which he had lazily dreamt in bygone days—with organ-music, flowers, rice, and all other fuss and worry left out of the programme. At weddings long ago, or, later, when reading of weddings—"the happy pair left subsequently for the South of France," etc., etc.—he had mentally put himself in the bridegroom's place. Would all this happen to him one day—to start amid smiles and tears on the long journey with the shy, innocent, trusting girl who has given her life into your hands? It had seemed a pleasant enough dream once.

It was hot, dusty, airless in the emptying town, and, during the last week before their departure, they took several little excursions. Her work was slackening; she was free now for long afternoons and evenings. They went once to Kew Gardens, once to Windsor, and one day when he meant to take her to Haslemere, she made him take her instead to Twickenham.

The fancy had come to her that she must look once more at the old house where she had lived as a child.

That was the day on which he first knew weariness in her company. Poor girl—she could not find her old home, and she would not abandon the search. She would not renounce hope: in spite of repeated failure, would not go out in a boat,

would continue the absurd hunt for that which had vanished utterly.

"There. It was in a road like this—running down to the river. Geoffrey, I believe this *is* the road at last," and she was all excitement once more—for the tenth time. "It was on the right-hand side. I think when we get round that corner I shall see it." And she hurried on before him.

But when the corner was turned, she saw nothing except horrid, new, red-brick cottages and shops : not a sign of the dear old house, or the ilex and laburnums of its dear old garden.

Obviously Twickenham, growing, expanding, flourishing in a hideous red-brick fashion, had long since rolled over Chester House—as it used to be called—and wiped it out of existence. But she would not believe the ugly fact. She went into shops and talked to people about the house, sought information from each passer-by, recovered her hope at every vague hint.

"Do you mind, Geoffrey? How kind you are to me. But I should so love to see it once again."

Poor girl—he understood quite well the thought that moved her. She had been happy here once : now she was happy again, perhaps for the first time since then. She wished to stand with him in front of the iron gate, peep through the bars into the cool, shadowy garden, and whisper to him of her love.

"There. Can you see me : a little child with yellow hair, making daisy chains on the lawn, watching the barges drift by, waiting for you, Geoffrey, even then, not dreaming of the long dull years to be lived through before you wanted me?"

A pretty thought really—but, oh, it was a wearisome business, this marching up and down and round about on the hot pavements, in the hot sun, hunting for what too plainly the years had stolen.

This was the first time that while with her he knew weariness ; and, before the unfortunate pilgrimage was completed, something of the old sensations of worry came back to him.

Nothing much—nothing like the bad old trouble, but a sense of difficulties gathering in his path, bothering, harassing matters to be dealt with that might call for effort, and a sudden incapacity to make effort or face fatigue.

He was so tired by the house-hunt that he had become disinclined to talk, and at Twickenham station he bought a newspaper—not for the news in it, but as a pretext for silence. If he pretended to read, she would refrain from talking to him.

But to-night there was news for him in the paper. One of those lives of which brother Jack had spoken was extinguished. Three lives now, not four. Their cousin, Lionel Elliott, had died of enteric fever at Gibraltar.

All the way to Vauxhall he sat silent, thinking of this news. The dead man was a soldier—a gunner—quite young : second son of old Sir John, the head of the family. Geoffrey had seen him only three or four times—a good-looking, amiable boy. It was sad that he should die so young, but one could not be supposed to feel any real grief for a lad one scarcely knew. His thought was purely selfish.

Worry. That is what this may mean. Jack, his younger brother, in motion—letters from Jack waiting now at his club, perhaps ; necessity, in Jack's view, that he should write long condolences to the bereaved father ; if the body be brought to England to lie by the dead mother in the family vault at Skelford Court, imperative duty that he should attend the funeral.

Death and the thought of death—could one never escape from it ? Nothing would induce him to go to any funeral, to dress himself in black and walk slow of foot behind men draped in black, staggering beneath the weight of the black-draped coffin. Such an ordeal might bring back all the old thoughts.

IV

Now they had left the hot, dusty town far behind them. They were in North Cornwall—away from the beaten track of the tourists, six miles from a railway station, alone with their love, unchallenged by inquisitive eyes, neglected by busy tongues. She had chosen the place when consenting to accept this great benefit : a summer holiday of which the cost should be paid by him.

It is called Brattiscombe : a long, straggling hamlet on the high table-land or moor—the wide, bare land that is guarded by distant hills. A white road with green waste on either side of it ; stone cottages in little gardens with white pales, scattered here and there, and the two principal buildings facing each other where the common or green is broadest : one the farmhouse-inn, and the other a small stone church in a walled graveyard ; sheep browsing by the roadside, children in pinafores trudging hand in hand to school, seagulls with white wings chattering above one's head as they drift inland on the cool sea breeze ; strong sun to burn one, fresh breeze to cool one, the sleeping moor to rest one's eye, the sparkle of the sea to gladden it—that is Brattiscombe.

They were Mr. and Mrs. Elliott—the honeymoon couple up at the inn—and all the little friendly world smiled at them, and none worried them.

They could wander away, through the small fields where gorse and ling fought with the pasture and slowly absorbed it ; and, by rough cart tracks, gaps and broken gateways, could soon reach the open waste of purple heather, brown rocks, and wide, sunlit solitude. Or they could wander down to the sea—across the old coach road, then down the long slope that leads to Brattiscombe Haven, to the iron beach, the iron cliffs, and the blue waves and white, sunlit foam. They carried their luncheon with them ; they were in the air from morning to night drinking the good air, bathing themselves in the good sunlight, seeking health and finding it.

Truly it is pretty, this Brattiscombe—Violet's discovery, heard of by Violet from a girl friend who had once hidden her love here, never seen before by Violet but always believed in, treasured in memory as something to be used some day should the chance come for its use.

It is prettiest in the soft evening light when the bare moorland is changing and softening, slowly turning golden. Prettiest of all to him, sitting in front of the inn door one Sunday evening, when the curious Sunday peace (and they say even the moorland sheep recognize it), that has been gathering, deepening all day long, now becomes of a sudden so strong that people cease talking, even thinking.

The church bells ring fast and loud, then slowly and lower: the single bell that summons the faithful. At one point the road drops so that it presents a summit or crest, and behind it far off are the golden hills; and slowly the faithful come over the crest into view—with the soft light behind them, the bell-music drawing them: old and young, in knots of two, three, and four, or one by one, on through the gate, past the graves, till the small stone church has swallowed them all. Then he is quite alone, with an empty road, browsing sheep, and the sound of organ and song.

And he thought of his companion, who was kneeling with the faithful, praying for him perhaps, vowing herself to him though no church had blessed their union. He would marry her. Why not? She was his now—did it matter what had gone before? Why trouble himself with speculation as to her past? The present and the future were his to deal with—not the past, the unalterable past. There was an old copy of Whitaker's Almanack at the inn, and he had read, tried to understand what it would be necessary to do. He must go to Launceston, Truro, one of the towns, and search for Bishop's surrogate—or some such preposterously named official—and obtain a licence. Trivial difficulties, stupid forms, endless explanations—all the world arming itself to frustrate one's good intentions. Still, he was cured now: he would be strong

enough to surmount all obstacles. Why not? It was the right thing—the wise thing to do. He was cured—and by her. Only thus could he pay his debt of gratitude. Gratitude—overwhelming gratitude. He clung to the thought of it, repeating the word to himself again and again—gratitude, gratitude—as if already it had become the only word he could use when he thought of her, as if already that other word, love, was almost forgotten.

On this night, as they sat together by the open window of the inn parlour, he hinted at what he had been planning or brooding over. When she turned from the window and the candle-light was on her face, he could read most plainly that he was plotting well. This would be the way to pay the debt. Her eyes were shining; her pale cheeks glowed with more than sunburn, more than candle-light; her breath was deep and long-drawn. But she was very sweet—refusing to say that she wished it, only showing him involuntarily, so that he could not misunderstand, how intensely she wished it.

“You mustn’t think of me, Geoffrey. We can go on as we are—always. I feel you’ll be true to me now. You have given me your love—that’s all I asked for.”

He did not go to Truro or to Launceston. If the thing had been easy of accomplishment, it would have been done. He would have carried out his plan there and then. It had been a thought and it remained a thought still, but a thought slowly losing strength, fading, obliterating itself.

Nothing came to worry him. The days glided fast, then slower, then very slowly. He had not cared or ventured to cut off completely all channels of communication with the outside world. The hall porter at the club knew his address, was sending on letters, but would tell his address to no one. Sent on by the club porter had come the expected letter from brother Jack, proving, when received, to be empty of the anticipated worry. Jack, writing from his fine country house near Andover, demanded no action from Geoffrey. The still

finer country house of the head of the family over the border in Wiltshire was silently mourning its loss, but would see no stately funeral. Sir John and Evelyn, the other son, had been with their loved one at Gibraltar when the end came. It had been a long illness; there had been time to summon them; all the sad rites had been performed out there. Now Sir John himself was ill—broken down under the strain, overcome by the heat, what not sad and distressing. But the main fact was this: Sir John had not yet come home. No need, therefore, for Jack to wait upon him, for Geoffrey to write to him.

Nothing now to worry him—nothing but this slowly encroaching weariness of the long, long days with his companion. Worry there: a struggle against recognizing the weariness, shame, and remorse when the struggle is without avail.

Gratitude—gratitude. That is the word, no other. It is ugly, it is shameful, it is a cruel law of life. When a man is sick he needs a nurse; when a man is well he needs her no longer.

One evening wind and rain swept up through the cleft in the hillside by Brattiscombe, blotted out the moor, the guarding hills, the red sunset sky. In the night a great storm of wind raged so fiercely that the stone walls of the inn seemed to shake. Next day—all day—and again the next day, the land was lost in white mist, and lashed by merciless rain. They were prisoners at the inn—that is to say, she was a prisoner: he went out and got drenched, came back for dry clothes, and went out again and got wet again.

Weariness was upon him in these days, weariness, weariness. Not of the rain and the mist, or the dull little room: but of her. It seemed to him that she was changing to what she had been as he first knew her. The light and life in her face were dying out; in the candle-light, on the last rainy evening, her face looked thin and pinched, with dark circles about her tired eyes; she looked old, colourless, uninteresting.

On the stairs of a sordid London house, one might pass her again and again without observing her, or noticing that she was in any wise different from the common toilers of the great town. One would not remember her or think of her again. If one tried to think of her again, she would seem, in one's memory, as vague as the shadow of herself thrown on the dingy wall.

He was eager for newspapers now, craving for letters, for anything that would break the monotony of the hours. One morning, a few days after the storm, there came a fine packet from the club porter—letters, telegrams, enough news to lift him in thought far from the quiet little room and his companion. When she spoke to him, he did not hear her voice. He was miles away.

On the other side of the breakfast-table she was reading in the Plymouth paper all about the sea fog, the sea storm, and the great disaster. Pity moved her as she read of it; but he would not listen to her: he was busy with his letters from brother Jack.

In the darkness, while they had felt the walls tremble beneath the fury of the cruel wind, a liner had been lost in the channel—far out of its course, blundering on, resolutely forging its way to destruction, it had gone upon the rocks off the French coast and become a total wreck.

Appalling to read of, appalling to think of—a floating town, a huge hotel, rent as if by earthquake, breached as if by battering rams, pouring out its human lives into the merciless hands of the vast invisible powers, Night, Despair, and Death.

Hundreds of lives had been forfeited—amongst them many valuable lives—"important" lives, as the Plymouth paper called them: such as lives of two well-known soldiers from India, a political agent from Egypt, an English baronet and his only surviving son from Gibraltar.

"Yes, yes," he said at last, looking up for a moment from his letter; "I know, I am reading about it too. Horrible!"

All the bare cruel facts of it were here in brother Jack's two letters, confirmed in brother Jack's telegrams. This was what it meant.

He had been poor and he was rich. He was Sir Geoffrey now, the head of the family, owner of Skelford Court and three or four parishes in Wiltshire, and perhaps five, six, or seven thousand a year, a little local potentate three or four times bigger than his potentate-brother; and Jack was urging him to hasten for consultations with lawyers, agents, and so forth. The king is dead: let the new king be swift in grasping sceptre and orb. It may be long before the new king can be crowned, but it is his duty to begin reigning without an hour's delay.

Come to us, prayed brother Jack in effect, and honour our humble court while you watch over your domain. We promise to soothe your natural grief, to aid you in your high task, to bow down to you henceforth and do you fitting homage. The king is dead, long live the king.

"What will you do?" she asked later. "Will you go?"

"Yes. I suppose I must go. I don't see how I can avoid going."

He parted with her that afternoon at Salisbury station. She was in the train, and he was standing on the platform by the carriage door, while they spoke their last words. She would dine comfortably in the first-class compartment; he had been very particular about the dinner basket from the refreshment-room, and had placed her in the charge of a well-tipped guard: he had done all he could for her.

"You'll write to me," she whispered.

"Oh yes, of course I'll write to you. Take care of yourself—don't work. You know you needn't work. I don't want you to work. Good-bye."

V

HE had fallen under the influence of Jack and his wife now. They kept him down in Hampshire—settling things.

Husband, wife, and children made much of him, hung on his words, smiled when he smiled, turned grave or thoughtful when he was moody. Never, never now did Jack fail to conceal his brotherly contempt, if, as seemed improbable, he ever felt it. The honoured guest is our rich brother, brother-in-law, uncle, etc. He is the head of our distinguished family.

He had never pined for money. He had been poor—hatefully, almost disgustingly poor for a man about town ; but, suffering from the pinch of this most difficult of all sorts of poverty, he had indulged in no dreams of possible wealth. He had dreamed so many dreams, but never this. Now that the money had come, he felt strangely elated, curiously strengthened. It was as if the good gold had been a medicine—a splendid tonic to brace his nerves. It was as if from all the good land he was drawing productive force, stealing from his own harvests material to enrich his own blood.

Money is power. When a man is rich he can never feel impotent. While the golden wand is within reach he must feel strong. That perhaps was his thought had he analyzed it.

All day long Jack was talking to him of his power, congratulating him, expatiating on his luck in a hard, practical way. The estate in grand order, noble house to let if he did not want to use it, good shooting to let with the house or keep for himself and his friends. No exhausting drains on the splendid rent-roll. Only one dowager—luck in that ; and she a very old dame who could not last long—lucky again. Married daughters of the last man with settled funds all paid over. Heaps of money coming in to him that might have gone elsewhere. The land and the houses must go with the blood-red hand ; but the dead man might have cut him down to the bone had he been given time for reflection and business arrangements.

“O Geoffrey, you lucky old rascal.”

There were interviews with bailiffs, agents, parsons, the more important of his tenants—Jack acting as aide-de-camp, equerry, grand vizier ; there were two long comfortable chats with the representative of the family solicitors—Brighthouse and Vaughan, grand old firm—sent down from London to wait upon him ; and there were visits with Jack, Mrs. Jack, and the children to view the desirable, lettable mansion. Everything was as it should be ; all the affairs relating to this important succession were in the most capable hands ; but, as was natural, time, much time was needed before things could settle themselves.

After his long drive in Jack's family waggonette he saw what should be his home, and little nephews and nieces clapped their hands at sight of it.

Long terraces, ornamental gardens, a stately house with drawn blinds and shuttered doors—seeming to sleep in the sunlight, fallen asleep when the last man closed his eyes, waiting for the new man to wake it. The big rooms were dark and cold, cheerless even when obsequious servants threw back shutters, pulled up blinds, and invited the sunshine to enter and welcome their new master. To his mind the library was the best room—a long, low room with many windows which he dimly remembered. It was the only room into which the sunlight seemed willing to enter freely. If he ever lived here, this would be the room he should use most.

Driving away in the afternoon, he looked back at the house with a little pride, but no pleasure. The sun was off it now and it threw a broad shadow across the terrace, the orange trees, and the parterres, taking all the colour from the pretty flowers, making sombreness and sadness where all should have been bright and gay.

He would let the place to any one who desired to take it. He should not care to live there—alone.

He was happy and contented with Jack and his wife in their comfortable home ; he felt strong and well ; but gradually

the thought of his estate, his money, and the duties and obligations they were bringing with them began to worry him. Jack talked incessantly of his future plans, but in fact he had made none. Gradually the fixed plan came to him : he must cut short the worry of it. Somehow he must shuffle off all business matters, instruct others to manage everything and make his own life free.

But brother Jack was horrified. Why ?

"I want to go away."

"Where ?"

"Round the world."

He had not thought of this until he replied. But, as he sought for an answer, the idea came to him. He would travel, go right away, to unseen lands—wander luxuriously for a year at least and thus postpone all possible fuss and annoyance. In a year or so he could come back, and see what he thought of it all then. If he did not then like the outlook, he could go away again. That was how he would use his money—he would travel, in great comfort. That was the right plan—it would mean escape from difficulties of all sorts. Henceforth he was eager to be off and away.

His will was law. Jack's voice might again show faintly his contempt for a man who shirked trouble, for a run-away potentate ; but it was Jack's duty to aid, not to hinder, the head of the family. It was the duty of all to obey. Messrs. Brighthouse and Vaughan were most obedient : it would be their pleasure as well as duty to keep the absentee client supplied with ample funds. Staff of servants to be reduced ; suitable tenant to be looked for ; powers of attorney to be executed—"Yes, yes :" to solicitors, to Jack, to all. Now that his mind was made up, he was daily more anxious to get away.

Only two difficulties or doubts now : his own health—and Violet.

He was well—that is to say, he felt well, quite well ; but was he really and truly well—what clever doctors would call well ? There was a clever doctor here—a young doctor, who

attended to the children and his sister-in-law, who was highly praised by Jack. Should he ask this clever young Dr. Hughes? He thought of it a long time; he wanted to ask him, yet he recoiled from asking him. But at last he summoned Dr. Hughes and asked his question.

"Do you consider me fit and sound—safe to set out on a long voyage—a year or two's travel, here and there—round the world?"

"Why not?" asked Dr. Hughes. "Do *you* consider yourself fit enough? That is sometimes half the battle."

"Well—I don't know. Yes—I think so—and yet . . . I had some queer sensations a little time back."

"What kind of sensations?"

He had asked the doctor one question, and now the doctor was asking him a dozen questions. But he was clever—this dark-haired clean-shaven Dr. Hughes—of quick insight and sympathetic manner. He led one on to speak frankly, although he seemed to understand vague hints and plain words equally well. He cheered one.

"Oh, that would be an illusion," said Dr. Hughes cheerfully. "That must have been simply an illusion—nothing more."

Sir Geoffrey had been carefully describing these sensations, doubts, and fears.

"What *is* an illusion exactly, Doctor—and why should one have them?"

"Well, you know," and the young doctor smiled pleasantly: "we call any erroneous perception of the senses an illusion. I hear my name called when I am aware that no one spoke—there was no sound really. I see some one—I think I see some one, but know there is not anybody there:—Illusions."

"They are hateful things—illusions."

"Oh, nothing to worry about. Our nerves play tricks with us. That is the revenge our nerves take when we give them too much work to do and tire them."

"But if one rests the nerves, they recover, don't they?"

"Certainly," said Dr. Hughes. "Don't bother yourself about that. I think you are all right—right as can be. I think you have been leading a somewhat unhealthy life—and that probably you were run down, completely run down, when you felt so queer. Now, a sea voyage should be just the thing for you. But, look here, don't go by what I say. Get another opinion."

"Another opinion? You are not sure then!"

"Yes," said Dr. Hughes with a pleasant laugh, "as sure as one ever is in my profession. But there's a good man at Exeter—a tip-top man—Dr. Richardson. Let's have him up one afternoon. I am only a country practitioner: he is a specialist."

"A specialist!" said Sir Geoffrey suspiciously. "What sort of specialist?"

"Well—a nerve-specialist. But I need not have called him a specialist. He is an all-round man. I feel sure he will approve of your trip, but he will give you useful advice. If, as I expect, he tells you to go, he will also tell you *how* to go and *where* to go."

"But," said Sir Geoffrey hesitatingly, "if we do have him over—what's-his-name—Richardson—won't people wonder?"

"Why should they wonder?"

"I don't know. No, they should not wonder—not think it odd."

"Certainly not. Nothing can be more usual than for a man about to travel to take the best medical advice before he starts."

Dr. Richardson was old, white-haired, courtly—quite of the ancient school in manner, though of the latest school in scientific attainments. He came from Exeter late one afternoon, drank tea with Sir Geoffrey and Dr. Hughes, and after tea gave the most cheering advice.

Nothing could be better than this scheme of going right round the world: Sir Geoffrey was to be complimented on his happy inspiration.

Dr. Hughes asked questions ; Sir Geoffrey asked questions ; and, as Dr. Richardson gave his authoritative answers, it seemed to Sir Geoffrey that this wise white-haired man could look through and through him, examine the minutest movements of the internal mechanism, see what was working well and what was working ill, as a clockmaker can see into the works of a large glass-fronted clock.

"Yes—a travelling companion, if you can find one—but not necessary. If you have thought of a companion—of the other sex, I would be very careful as to the selection. That is the ideal companionship of course—to a man of your age—if you can be sure that it will not become irksome. . . .

"I would say : Take no companion rather than take an idle, aimless sort of person. And that would apply to a servant also. Good travelling servants are rare. I would be very careful not to take a bad, useless servant.

. . . "I spoke just now of an *aimless* person—and I would say you should not yourself wander about the world aimlessly—not knowing how long you will stay in any particular place, accepting chance invitations, missing boats because the Governor, or the Rajah, or whoever he may be, has asked you to a state banquet. The important thing to you is the sustained purpose of your tour. . . .

"A programme essential—carefully made out and *adhered* to. Our friend Hughes might help you with your programme. You might, if you chose, report yourself to him at different stages—with pride, you know, in having made you preordained stage. We want you to recover what I may call the habit of purposive action. . . .

"The little difficulties of travel to be overcome—the sense of achievement more than anything else—will restore nervous tone, replenish your depleted store of self-confidence."

He was grateful to Dr. Hughes. Dr. Richardson had looked through and through him, and pronounced him sound. He would pin his faith on white-haired Dr. Richardson.

One doubt or difficulty—that of his health—done with for ever. With a light heart he made out his programme, wrote to book his cabin on the vessel that would take him to New York. Westward and still westward through the New World to the old—Japan, India,—Australia—and still westward home. You must follow the sun or go to meet it—does it matter?

He would go without a travelling-companion—of either sex. He would not even burden himself with a servant.

Only one doubt, or difficulty remaining—Violet.

He had thought it all out now : her fate had hung in the balance till the interview with Dr. Richardson was nearly over. In truth he had not wanted her ; but, if Dr. Richardson had used different words, she too might have had a berth on the big ship.

He does not want her. With money, almost unlimited money, he can fight the sadness alone. But he must use some of his money for her now. He must wave the golden wand over her head before he vanishes. He has thought it all out.

She will suffer. Some pain she must suffer. But, after all, it cannot be much to her, really. She must have gone through this sort of thing before. It sounds ungrateful, unchivalrous, meanly prosaic, when one puts the thought into words—but this is not the first time, or the second, that pain has come to her through love.

No need for her to work any more—that is a comfortable thought for him, a thought that will bring comfort to her. Messrs. Brighthouse and Vaughan must look to this.

Two days after the visit of the Exeter doctor, Mr. Brighthouse is here to take instructions. Mr. Brighthouse, senior partner of the eminent firm, has come all the way from London to see his important client. This little matter is one that is best dealt with by principals. Mr. Brighthouse—man of the world, urbanely cynical, tolerantly philosophical—understands only too well. Three hundred a year for our lady-friend. Precisely. “A very generous provision.”

“Quite confidential—my dear Sir Geoffrey, leave it to us.”

"But my friend may raise objections——"

"Leave it to us. We often have to make such arrangements for clients. A little diplomacy, a few tears, and then all is right. The money is the best argument. The money speaks for itself."

"But she does not value money."

"She will—when you are gone. She'll have nothing else to value then."

"If she refuses to accept the settlement——"

"She won't do that. Leave it all to us—we are used to these friendly treaties. Indeed, one client of ours went round the world on purpose to get clear of entanglements. We had *three* such arrangements to make for *him*. . . . I would suggest allowance rather than settlement."

"No. Settlement."

"Very well. You may leave it all in our hands."

Now, having given his instructions, he could feel easy in his mind. In two more days he would be on the ocean. Should he run up to London and bid her adieu? No—better not: too painful for both of them: kinder to her to go without seeing her again.

He had sent an old servant of brother Jack's to the workers' house at Chelsea to bring away some of his trunks and books. He could send the same man again to clear out the rooms, pay the rent, give up the keys, etc. He would not go himself: he would write to her for the last time.

And on the eve of departure he writes.

He has provided for her future—this is the gist of the farewell letter—and she is not to work. He is very sorry—but is claimed by his own people, etc. Will never forget her kindness, always feel grateful, etc., etc.

Next day he was gone, on the big ship from Southampton, seen off by his own people—hand fondly pressed by brother and by sister-in-law, hand cried over by little nephew and niece who do not know why they are crying, did not intend to cry, but in this last hour of leave-taking all the world cries.

VI

NEARLY a year and a half had passed, and he was homeward bound—from Australia—in the good steamship *Orion*.

Easily, luxuriously, yet after a business-like fashion, he had seen the wonders of the world. Old lands, new lands—crumbling towns that had stood unchanged for a thousand years, built perhaps on the ruins and buried pomp of three civilizations, so that if you dug beneath their palaces, you might strike upon marble floors, frescoed walls, kings' chambers, queens' bath, to tell you of palaces beyond the memory of man ; glaring, flaring cities raised to mushroom splendour within a decade ; sacred rivers and lakes, guarded by superstition for the little gods that flit and hover in the shape of the common birds of the air ; ship canals, cut by strenuous, nature-defying moderns, to sap an old sea trade, to steal a market and wreck a nation ; mountains that spit fire ; islands that have sprung quaking from the ocean, and one day quaking will return to it ; fields of white flowers, fields of black oil, fields of yellow gold—but to each wonder its allotted time, no lingering, no shilly-shally about moving on, never a boat missed, never a train missed in all his long tour.

He had stuck to his programme, accomplished every pre-determined stage of it ; and now, strong with the sense of ordered effort and steady, undeviating action, he felt himself another man. He was carrying more flesh : the Atlantic had given him a pound ; in the rattle across America he had gained ounces ; another pound had come to him on the Pacific coast ; Japan and India had taken ounces away ; but New Zealand, Tasmania, and the South seas had paid back in solid pounds. He would, with luck, carry home eight added pounds.

A tall bronzed healthy man—that is what he seemed to fellow-passengers on the *Orion*. A distinguished-looking, a handsome silent man—narrow, clean-shaven face, dark hair with silver streaks above the small, well-shaped ears ; something of sadness in the dark eyes that appealed strongly to women ;

something in the lines of the mouth that suggested pride or curbed fretfulness to men ; but a pleasant smile and a pleasant voice approved of by men and women. He was reserved, reticent as to intercourse with fellow travellers, not greedy for conversation with each chance acquaintance—showing characteristics to be looked for by good colonials in a wanderer from the old country of his state and importance.

It may be supposed that good colonials—of whom there were many on board—thought none the better of him because he had a handle to his name ; but, doubtless, they thought none the worse of him. Good colonials, with hearts warming to the old country, would have welcomed his friendship had he cared to give it. But, in fact, he felt drawn to none of these strangers—except to one small family : Anglo-Indian father, mother, and pretty daughter. And, after a time, they seemed drawn to him.

The boat had her full complement of passengers : it was a prosperous voyage. The boat was like a gay little town moving fast across the unruffled plain of water—laughter and mirth, chatter, chatter, endless talk that changes to flirtation, that deepens into love—by day sunshine and playing games, in the evenings electric light, concerts, dances, amateur actings. There was much love-making : time enough for young people to fall in love and out of it again.

He shunned the concerts and general gaieties, but he enjoyed the society of the quiet little family—these Ingrams from India and New South Wales, going home to settle after years of exile. Papa had the sober civil-service manner, but was shrewd, kindly, and, in his own way, good company. Mamma was placid, amiable, desperately commonplace. Miss Florence was very pretty.

As he walked up and down the deck with papa, day after day, hour after hour, Miss Florence watched him from her deck-chair. As he came towards her, she was reading her book ; but as he went away from her, she was watching him. Although he was twice her age, she seemed to like the look or

tall, thin, bronzed Sir Geoffrey. The order in which he made their acquaintance was the most natural one—first papa, next mamma, last of all Miss Florence.

But when he had been introduced to her, and had attained with her a certain footing as papa's friend, papa lost his agreeable walking companion. Sir Geoffrey walked with the daughter now: the parents were left to their chat in the deck-chairs.

She would often come back to show herself and give tidings. On the other side of the promenade deck they had just seen something of interest—a cloud shaped like a man's hand, a bird that flew like a *land*-bird, something that appeared like a bottle floating in the water.

"Fancy, mamma! It really looked like a bottle from a wreck."

Mamma smiled at them. She was comfortable in her chair: she would leave the bottle and them to take care of themselves.

"Mamma, I have come back to sit down. Sir Geoffrey and I have walked at least ten miles."

"Oh, Flo. How you do exaggerate! Ten miles! You haven't walked half that distance."

Mamma was all commonsense, commonplace.

The girl walked with him, talked with him; listened to all he said, made him talk well; once, when he said something really clever and knew he had done so, she exhibited innocent admiration of him. He was easy with her, happy with her; she seemed to understand him. He thought of her more and more.

She was slight and slim; she had a small face with a splendid crown of dark hair, limpid truthful eyes, red lips, dimpled chin—the face of a child. These things wove themselves into the tissue of all his thought of her. She was fresh and sweet as a spring day in England; she was candid and pure as a babbling brook; she was youth and hope and innocent life personified. She loved her parents; her parents loved her:

she was love personified. In truth she was a good and a pretty little girl.

He thought of her day after day, always—could think of nothing else. It was like what the doctors might term obsession—but a bland, kind obsession, without morbid care, with nothing but life and hope in it. Slowly, then faster, the love-longing formed itself, spread, and filled him.

He wants her—he would be happy with her for ever.

And it is all so smooth—like the summer sea over which the great boat glides—in his courtship.

He speaks to her father first : “ Am I too old ? ”

“ How old are you ? ”

“ Forty-one.”

“ A boy ! ” says her father.

Then he speaks to the girl—and the girl says yes.

The sun shines a little brighter ; the air is more like wine. The trellis is not too old for the passion flower to cling to it. He is not too old for her—she, as well as papa, says so emphatically.

But in these gliding days, in the full throb of his great happiness, he thinks now of the other girl—of Violet.

As the big ship glides homeward, he thinks of the other girl : by day, with a soft little hand lying in his when no one watches ; and at night, all alone, when the stars shine from the measureless void, and the ship shivers while it glides, as if frightened, big as it is, by the immensity that surrounds it. And one night he sees her face, looking at him through the porthole of his cabin. A momentary illusion only, known to be an illusion throughout that long, long moment—a presentment, the optic nerves aiding the cell centres as memory works, the retina giving up its dead impression as thought sounds the dead words :—

“ Oh, be kind to me.”

VII

ON landing, his first thought was of Violet. In the train from Plymouth he thought of her persistently. He must go to her at once, assure himself that she was well and fairly happy.

It was early in March, and to him the country looked desolate, bare, and cold ; but to his companions, gazing with the hungry eyes of exiles, the landscape seemed beautiful, homelike, welcoming. He was thinking of the wild west country on the other side of Plymouth, wide land of sunlight as he had known it with her a year and a half ago. How had she borne their parting ? Had she found consolation ? Had she ever written to him ? No letter had reached him ; but she might have written several letters—which he would find waiting for him at the office of his solicitors in Bedford Row with accumulated piles of letters from agents, bailiffs, etc. Messrs. Brighthouse and Vaughan, with brother Jack to aid them, had spared him on his travels : they had saved him from all worry : they had sent him cash, the only thing essential. They had followed their old maxim. Money can speak for itself : each draft and letter of credit was a message—"All well at home."

Sitting silent and thoughtful, while his betrothed gaily chattered to mamma and papa, he reproached himself for cowardice. It had been cowardly to shirk a final interview with poor faded Violet—mean and cowardly to run away without one squeeze of the hand, one last kiss and spoken prayer for her comfort and peace. He wished now that he had been brave. He wished that he might find her contented and consoled. Above all he wished that. Plenty of time for consolation—the new love that heals the old. He would be happy if she could tell him that she had a lover—a future husband. Perhaps she was married already. If so, he would be very happy. Then all would be easy ; he could say : "And now you must wish me joy, because *I* am to be married in a month. I only came to see you because I am as grateful now as I ever was ; and I have thought of you a great deal. But you see, Violet, it was

all for the best, our separation. Painful to both of us—but best for you, in the end.”

Then he need never reproach himself again: not a shadow could fall upon his path.

That first night in London he was of course busy with excited Flo, and papa and mamma—playing escort and guardian, establishing them in bright, cheerful rooms at their grand hotel, getting rooms for himself in another grand hotel close by, coming back to dinner, sitting with them after dinner until excitement flashing from bright eyes turned to imperious command, and he had to take Miss Flo and papa for a stroll about the lamp-lit town, in search of something that might be called an appetite for the light supper at a gay and crowded restaurant. It was late—long past bedtime, as papa said—before his pleasant duties were all over.

But in the morning—the very first thing—he went to Chelsea, to the big, dismal house near the King’s Road, in order to make his inquiries and set his mind completely at rest. He would not be easy again till this was done. It was only ten by the office clock, as he stood in the dingy hall and looked in through the window of the porter’s room. Nothing changed in the office or the hall: fresh paint and distemper much needed still: names on the wall a little dirtier, more difficult to read—Fenn’s name still there as tenant of the old rooms—“Flat 24, Fourth Floor, Mr. Fenn.”

The porter was out, but his wife—decent hard-working little woman who scrubbed floors for lodgers, and dusted rooms and made beds if required—came from the inner room to attend to the visitor. She was quite unchanged—talkative, friendly, wholesome-looking as of old, and she remembered him at once.

“Mr. Elliott. Bless me—well to be sure. Lor’. Ain’t you sunburnt? You look a picture—so fine and strong in your health to what you were. Well now. *Not* Mr. Elliott now, is it? *Sir* Geoffrey, isn’t it? Your servant—what you sent here before you left us—he told us the grand news—of what

a great gentleman you had become. My 'usband will be in directly. I on'y wish you were coming back to us. You took all our luck away with you—you did indeed, sir."

"I came to ask about Miss Maynard."

"Miss Maynard! Oh—there."

"Is she living here still?"

The woman stared at him stupidly.

"She is not living here, I suppose! But can you give me her address?"

Then, as the woman talked to him, he leaned his arm against the wall, and the warm bronze slowly went from his face and left it cold and grey.

"D'you mean you don't know—never heard? Didn't you see it in the paper? It was all in the paper. . . . She shot herself. There was an inquest and I don't know what besides—such a fuss as I never saw. . . .

"Pore soul—I never would 'a believed she'd go and do a thing like that. But she did it, sir, with her own hand—they tried to make it out murder at first. Lost her senses, they said at the inquest. Locked herself in her room up there"—and the woman glanced at the office ceiling—"and pistoled herself."

"When—did—this—happen?"

"A year ago—no, more than that. September—or was it October?—two years come next October. I ought to know, for it fairly emptied the house—and the house has never been the same since. I say our luck has gone. You took it all away with you, sir."

He went out into the King's Road and waited at a street corner till he could get a cab. This was where he used to walk with her on those breathless summer nights, past these common shops where one had to thread one's way through the crowd in the hot glare of the gas jets, down that silent street to the shadowy river. When they turned from the brightly lit thoroughfare into the darkness of the side street, she used to slip

her hand through his arm. He thought of it as he stood waiting for the cab.

He drove to his solicitors in Bedford Row, but the hour was still so early that none of the principals had yet arrived. Mr. Brighouse would be here soon. If he would kindly wait in Mr. Brighouse's room, Mr. Brighouse would be with him by eleven-fifteen at latest. The polite clerk wheeled a leather armchair nearer to the cheerful fire, stirred the coals, went away, and returned with *The Times* newspaper. The client was staring into the fire, not reading *The Times*, when the senior partner arrived.

Mr. Brighouse, gravely answering questions and giving information, pretended to be deeply affected. He turned up his eyes, drew in his breath, puffed out his cheeks, clasped his hands, opened them wide, very slightly shrugged his shoulders—saying by gesture and attitude rather than words: "Will of Providence. Resignation a duty."

"Oh, a shocking affair, Sir Geoffrey. But I hope you don't blame us. We kept the sad event from you—not wishing to distress you. It was irrevocable—then why distress you? My partners and I debated the matter and we decided to await your return. We must bear the blame for that decision—but for nothing else, Sir Geoffrey."

Then Sir Geoffrey learned all that there was to learn. Pending discussion, personal interviews, etc., with regard to the proposed settlement, a cheque on account—earnest of good faith, as it were—had been sent to the lady. That cheque had been returned by the lady; and then, almost immediately, before one could look round, there came "the appalling news"—this "tragic break-off of negotiations."

"Here, Sir Geoffrey, are the report of the inquest—our Mr. Richards attended it—and so forth. If you care to look through them. . . .

"Your name was never mentioned—from the start to the finish. Mr. Richards was there to deal with the point had it been raised—but in fact it was not. He had no occasion to

open his mouth. In fact, I must say, I think we were fortunate. No letters of yours for instance. Nothing . . .

" . . . No. This unhappy lady—ere reason tottered and fell—it would seem had the wisdom—the discretion—to destroy letters and so forth."

Thus the solicitor gravely, suavely told the tale of this really shocking affair, and then the client read of the affair in the papers handed to him.

Evidence of the house-porter ; evidence of a doctor. . . . Undoubtedly the deceased fired this revolver with her own hand. . . . No doubt whatever. . . . No one knew how she became possessed of the weapon—just a Service revolver. Webley Service revolver ; Government ammunition ; eighteen cartridges. . . .

"Evening of October the 12th"—two nights after he had sailed. Three days, two nights, for her to think over his farewell letter and of how she should answer it. *This*, then, was her answer.

"The funeral ? What was done about the funeral ?"

"The funeral ?"

"Where is she buried ?"

"Well—the fact is, Sir Geoffrey, we had no instructions. Quite without instructions—for such an event. We debated—what you would probably wish. Somewhat difficult—perhaps imprudent—to intervene—especially if she had friends—relations of her own. But we did feel strongly that we must move in the matter ;" and Mr. Brighthouse opened his hands and turned up his eyes. "When we made tentative inquiries—it was all over. No relatives, it appeared, and so the thing had been hurried through—by the authorities. . . .

"Sir Geoffrey, I hope—I sincerely trust—that you do not blame us."

He blamed himself—not them. Walking away from the solicitors' office, he thought of it. With his hands in the deep pockets of his overcoat, he sauntered through the crowded

street, lounged outside shop windows, looking at people and at things, but seeing neither, completely lost in his own thoughts. No. Those men—Brighouse, Richards—what's his name—were not to blame.

They had not provided her with the weapon of release ; they had not taught her how to use it, and then made the use of it inevitable. It was he who had shown her how to load, or unload, a Webley Service revolver ; given her cartridges—given her annihilation neatly packed in brass cases that glittered and shone where the smear of tallow had rubbed off. In memory he could see the tin box and the revolver lying on the table of his room that night. Those men were blameless : they could not guess that she was fatally doomed to swift destruction.

He thought he could understand her fate now. She has saved his life at the cost of her own. A life was wanted. Death was beckoning. He had saved himself by finding a substitute.

He suffers now—remorse, remorse. Pity, like a cancerous growth,—like a cancer in the breast, tortures him. He cannot eat, he cannot sleep—because of the rodent misery about his heart, with its dull burning aches and sharp stabbing pains.

In these early blustering March days he is always alone, whether walking in the streets, brooding in the silence of his room, or listening to music and the clatter of knives and forks in a crowded restaurant. Thought of his new live love has been almost erased by thought of his old dead love.

He went back to the Chelsea house and found out where she lay buried. The porter came with him from the house ; walked with him, drove with him from place to place—to coroner's officer, registrar, law officials : gross heavy-faced men, seated at tables and desks, dealing with death day after day, all day long. The porter helped him to discover the cemetery—far away to the north-west of the great town, in a vast field of death owned by some Board or Corporation—the

far-off place where the dead are pushed away to make room for the living.

He himself walked and talked as a man in a dream. Rain was falling, dusk was falling, all was grey and vague as he walked through the iron gates of the cemetery, past a lodge and garden, through long avenues of tombs, till he came to the ground beneath which she lay hidden. Few tombstones here : the graves, small mounds of earth—like the waves of a choppy sea. Wooden crosses here and there—two boards nailed together and a name daubed in black paint ; but her name nowhere. Here, somewhere here—but the spot unmarked, not discoverable. She had no relatives to pay her honour with nailed boards and sacred emblems. She was quite alone in the world. She had told him so.

For a few days he drank heavily. If one cannot obtain oblivion in sleep—something at least to deaden the pain of waking thought.

He was to be married in a month. He was a man of large property who had just come home after a long absence. Naturally he would have much to attend to, would be occupied by many business matters. His excuses were readily accepted by the Ingrams. Pretty Miss Flo herself had so much to do that she enjoyed little leisure. Four weeks is *dreadfully* short time for getting ready one's trousseau.

Marriage settlement would be all right—Messrs. Brighthouse and Vaughan had brief but sufficient commands. Mr. Ingram—as a careful father—had not overlooked this amicable business transaction : he was not giving away his daughter quite empty-handed. He understood that his future son-in-law would be wanted down in Wiltshire, and approved of his going there. But, in fact, Sir Geoffrey did not go to Skelford Court : he remained in London at his big hotel and told the hotel servants to admit no visitors. Brother Jack was most happily out of England—on the Riviera, nursing his sick wife, sulking perhaps over unwelcome news of what perhaps seemed to him a hasty,

upsetting sort of marriage. Would any marriage made by brother Geoffrey have delighted brother Jack? It was doubtful if Jack would be back in time for the ceremony.

Thus, Sir Geoffrey was not molested in these days by friends or relations: no one came to rouse him from his dark memories. He could stay in the hotel sitting-room and be alone, as long as he wished, with no other company than his thoughts and the brandy bottle.

All his drinking failed to burn away the ugly thoughts. His face was pasty and pale; his eyes were bloodshot; his hands shook—that was the effect of the brandy. But the brandy brought him no sleep. He had sensations—stupid sensations: erroneous perceptions of the senses, if not troublesome illusions. One evening when the floor-waiter came for orders, and, receiving no answer to his taps upon the door, entered the room, Sir Geoffrey shouted at him in wrath.

“Who the devil are you? What the devil do you want here?”

The man was frightened by such unexpected violence. He was the waiter, he explained, who attended to all sitting-rooms on this floor: he had only looked in to see that the fire was burning brightly, and to ascertain if there were any orders for him.

“Oh, very good,” said Sir Geoffrey. “That’s all right. For the moment, I didn’t recognize you as the waiter.”

He had imagined—really it was not worth recalling what he had thought. But he had experienced an illusion—a very strong illusion. He must be done with this brandy. The brandy did him no good, and it had begun to play the deuce with his nerves.

VIII

At last he had pulled himself together and emerged from his brooding solitude. Irrevocable. He must think of it no more. He had almost forgotten his new love and the happy

future. He has given too much time to the unalterable past : he must go to his betrothed : she will help him to forgetfulness.

The marriage preparations were going on apace ; his sweetheart was so busy with her trousseau that she had scarcely missed him. Yet now that he was with her she was all love and smiles, eager to have him perpetually at her side—to turn to for advice as to hats, frocks, trimmings, and all the joyous days to which the trousseau was leading them.

By her wish the happy pair are to spend the first week of their honeymoon at the bridegroom's house in Wiltshire. Then they will fly away to the South of France, the Italian lakes, Venice probably. The sleeping house in Wiltshire will wake itself for this auspicious occasion. No tenant had been found for it, in spite of its desirability and lettableness : it had remained in charge of the reduced staff of servants, who will now admit the sunlight, warm it with fires, brighten it with flowers, make it assume a cheerful welcoming aspect for the bridal couple. The reduced staff is sufficient for this task. The household can wait for expansion till the honeymoon is over.

The days were slipping by. He was with his love always now—buying her presents and still more presents : trinkets, chains, jewels, all the pretty things that girls desire to deck their own prettiness. He loved her more than ever, clung to her company, hung on her words, sunned himself in her smiles. But he could not really find forgetfulness—even with her hand lying in his. The warm little hand used to turn of a sudden cold, and heavy—like a dead hand. Illusion.

A very quiet, pleasant wedding : an April day for the sweet girl-bride—sunshine and tears—happy tears. Banks of white blossom in the church, gleams of pale sunlight falling from a high window, organ music swelling deep and strong—to him it was all dreamlike. Friendly happy luncheon-party at the hotel, kind words, pressing of hands, drinking of healths

—then hurried change of clothes and a long waiting for the bride, who is putting off the bridal garment and taking so much time that there is risk of missing the train at Paddington.

On this wedding day, he had illusions. He was not greatly disturbed by them—the feeling of vague dreamlike happiness possessed him so strongly. From the morning it had been a long dreamy progress, without real thought. But the erroneous perceptions were frequent: during the marriage service, the sensation that thousands of people were watching him—beyond the stone pillars of the almost empty church, crowds gathering, packing densely; again, as the organ music of the wedding march rolled out in vibrating waves and they walked down the aisle together, the sensation that some one was following closely, was beside him at the carriage door; and again now.

The bride is ready at last in her pretty travelling frock. A few tears, many embraces—"Good-bye, my dearest, dearest mother"—and then, in a moment, they are driving away together; the sun is shining again from her wet eyes; and she links her hands—two leaden hands, about his shaking arm. A swift, unheralded illusion.

Hence onward it is dream-like happiness again, without thought, without fear. This is the old dream of his youth come true at last: life crowned with innocent love: the wedding day, the wedding journey, the wedding night.

A happy, most happy dream—realization, it seems to him now, of what he has hoped for vaguely, prayed for dumbly, all his life: the love that strengthens, heals, and purifies.

The long train journey is over—sunlight, dusk, a glorious red sky; and it is night as they drive through country lanes, through dimly lit villages, in the darkness of a wood where the carriage lamps flash upon the smooth stems of beech trees that seem themselves to be moving; through the park gates, over the wide parklands, towards the lighted windows of the big house.

Home now. This is their home. Servants welcome them; bright lamps, good fires bid them welcome, wish them joy.

She is enchanted with everything—a happy child hurrying from room to room, uttering childlike exclamations of delight.

“Geoffrey, it is too lovely for words. Far, far more splendid than I could guess from your description. It is a palace.”

“Only because it has found a queen.”

“Am I your queen? Then you are my king,” and, with child-like grace, she took his hand, raised it to her lips, and curtsied.

He was waiting for her in the hall when she came downstairs to dinner. She had dressed herself in red velvet, had put some of his glittering jewels about her white neck; her dark hair was a noble crown to the bright young face; and again he told her that she was a queen. Brighter and more beautiful than any jewels was the trustful love that shone from her eyes.

The dinner was most dream-like. This is his own house, and he scarcely knows it; nothing in the panelled room speaks to him of his past; these are his faithful servants, yet they have strange faces; the girl who smiles at him each time that the servants turn their backs is his wife. Wonderful to think of in dreamy contentment, as one eats and drinks without tasting the food or wine. This is the first dinner of the married couple: the years, the long happy years will roll by, and they will be together thus—man and wife.

The words are in her thought too as they sit before the fire after dinner in another panelled room. Man and wife—can this wonderful thing be true? She is radiantly happy, glorying in the thought of it—with a sweet innocent joy that melts his heart, makes it swell as though it would burst with gratitude and pride.

“Think of it, Geoffrey;” and she slides from her chair, sits on a stool at his feet, rests her white arms on his knee. “Six months ago you had never seen me, didn’t know that I existed; and now you are my husband, and I am your wife. We came from the ends of the earth, didn’t we? to meet and make each

other happy. . . . Say it, Geoffrey. Your wife. Call me your wife. I want to hear what it sounds like."

"My wife."

"My husband. . . . It will be *months* before I shall be used to the sound of it, and able to say it properly—before strangers—as though you really belonged to me and I thought nothing of it."

Her innocent joy warmed and melted his heart, made him ashamed of the grosser thought that passed through his mind with the sound of the words as she uttered them. Husband and wife—but as yet only in name. The church has blessed them : this is their marriage night.

The happy evening was over ; the house was hushing itself to sleep again. Sounds of bolts and bars as the shutters are carefully closed ; footsteps of servants in the hall and in the lower rooms as lamps are turned out, window fastenings examined, doors gently shut—then silence : the house is dropping asleep. A night lamp is burning by the window at the end of the long corridor. Coming to his dressing-room just now, he looked through this window, at the terrace garden, half black and indistinct in shadow, and half cold and clear in the moonlight.

In his dressing-room he had been sitting by the fire, for what seemed an immense time, listening, waiting. Through the door that led into the other room he could hear her light footstep as she moved to and fro. Then, at last, all was still in the other room. May he go to her now ? Surely he may go to her now.

"Geoffrey."

As he entered, she whispered his name. He was softly closing the door and, when he turned, he saw her—his sweet young bride—so small in the big firelit room—in the big bed so small, so childlike—the dark hair tumbling about her face, clothing her fragile shoulders. Coming to her, he saw the look in her eyes—a wonderful shining glance of love and trust and unhesitating welcome.

Then, stooping over her, he took her in his arms ; and she laid a leaden hand upon his neck, clasped leaden hands behind his neck—cold hands that seemed to freeze his spine.

For a moment he struggled, and then he shrieked—so that the silent house echoed and re-echoed to his cry.

“My God—let me go. Let me go.”

The living girl had changed to the dead girl—cold dead arms were holding him, dragging him down towards white lips, sightless eyes, sunken cheeks. Struggling fiercely, he tore himself free, staggered back from the bed, and hid his eyes, as though to shut out the horror of it.

Drawing back and away, shaking in every limb, he reached a door, burst it open, and went raving down the long corridor.

“A dead, rotting corpse ! Oh, my God. My God—have mercy on me and save me from her.”

Lamps were lit again by trembling fingers ; night was turned into day ; white-faced maids, white-faced men running hither and thither—it was as if bedlam had broken loose.

The master was mad. He had gone raving out of the house : was raving and gesticulating in the stable yard : with difficulty was persuaded to wrap himself in coat and rug, and return to the house under guard of his terrified servants. Our master is mad—servants are taking command, issuing orders, rushing to and fro as if madness had seized them also. Our mistress, with chattering maids, behind locked doors, is fainting or sobbing hysterically—has been frightened almost to death. Horses are dragged out of their stalls, harnessed to a carriage, and driven furiously—doctor to be fetched, clergyman to be roused, telegraphic messages to be prepared, the dire news to be spread far and near : bedlam rampant.

But Sir Geoffrey was not mad as doctors and lawyers understand the word.

He had suffered under a violent illusion, and the after effect

was nervous shock—really nothing more. Looking back, he knew that it had been an illusion. His condition was that of a sane man who had thought he saw a ghost and in a paroxysm of unreasoning terror had acted insanely. But under the influence of panic fear sane men always act insanely. When the fear has spent itself, sanity returns; and thus it was with Sir Geoffrey. This was the opinion of the local doctor. The doctor had remained with him, was watching him, guarding him—was with him now in the library when the bride's father arrived.

Sir Geoffrey, talking to his father-in-law, was haggard, miserable to see, dreadfully agitated, but obviously in possession of all his faculties. He placed himself unreservedly in the hands of his friends: he would faithfully follow their advice, loyally submit to their decisions.

"I'll do anything on earth that you tell me. . . . But may I see her, before you take her away? . . . How is she? . . . Will she ever let me see her again?"

The bride was to be taken away—that went without saying. With her father's consent she would not speak to her husband before she left him. Sir Geoffrey had better come to London to-morrow in charge of the doctor—and wait patiently until, after family consultation, verdict of doctors, council of lawyers, etc., etc., his future—their future—could be considered and mapped out.

But the bride would not be guided by her father. She would see her husband, speak to him, touch his hand before they parted.

It was in the hall, and he waited for her where he had stood last night, at the foot of the big staircase. The carriage was at the door; servants, careful to avoid meeting his eye, watched him closely; the doctor on the hearth-rug was watching him, while he pretended to be looking at the burning logs in the basket grate: all were watching him as, leaning on her father's arm, she came down the stairs and took his hand.

She was very pale—white cheeks, and eyes red from

weeping ; her lips trembled ; her hand trembled. He could read in her face terror, pity, and love. The love was there still, so that he could read it plainly.

"Geoffrey," she whispered. "You are to get well—quickly. You are to get well—for my sake ;" and she squeezed his hand, and passed on to the waiting carriage.

Of course she thought him mad. They all thought him mad—except the local doctor, who said he might be going mad, but he was not mad yet, and no decent medical man would certify him as mad.

London doctors confirmed the opinion of the local doctor. Quite impossible to pronounce Sir Geoffrey Elliott insane. He submitted to closest surveillance, presented himself for examination, interrogation, cross-questioning by ablest mental specialists ; and, after weeks, this was the verdict—not mad. Who can account for the tricks which, under certain conditions, our nerves may play us ? Tired nerves, over-excited nerves—one may suggest causes : one can do no more. This unhappy gentleman—for all can see that he is miserably unhappy—has been the victim of a most distressing illusion. That, however, is past and done with. What can medical science say as to the future ? Well, only this : no reason that we can detect why there should be a return of the illusion : every reason to hope that it may not return.

And what can friends, relatives, family solicitors, sitting in council, say ? As men of the world, as sincere well-wishers, little beyond this : A most painful situation ; wife and yet no wife ; love on both sides—all who can guess at the state of affairs wondering, chattering, building up scandal. The painfulness to the parties themselves, to all well-wishers, unless we can stop it promptly, will increase, must increase. Surely then, love, good feeling, family prudence, common policy point to our endeavouring to smooth things over—in a word, to our giving Sir Geoffrey another chance. Lady Elliott wishes it ;

Sir Geoffrey most ardently desires it. Can we be justified in saying No?

Thus, after so much delay, Sir Geoffrey was given his second chance: the bridal couple started on their second honeymoon. Not alone this time. A friendly family party, setting out on their travels—a pleasant May tour: Paris, Lucerne, through the Gotthard to the Italian lakes—not too late yet for the lovely Italian lakes, which father and mother are also longing to see. No one will guess that this is a bridal trip. Mamma has her maid; the bride has her maid; the bridegroom is bringing his keeper-valet, engaged for him by kind medical advisers. They will stay a night or two in Paris, to repose themselves after the fatigues of packing and departure, and then go on to Basle and rest again.

But in Paris the tour comes to an end.

In Paris the illusion has returned—stronger, more violent, not to be shaken off so easily. It is a shocking, poignantly distressing outbreak. The marriage cannot be consummated: he thinks it is the dead woman who has raised her lips to his.

In Paris he tells all who will listen what has happened. In Paris he says he understands the cause of the catastrophe. No matter how many chances they gave him, the dead girl would come from her grave each time to intervene—to thrust herself between him and his love. The dead girl says, "No. This marriage shall not be. I am this man's bride: he shall have none other."

IX

THERE was to be a nullity suit. The bride must be released from her bond—all were in accord. Brother Jack had returned to take his place on family councils; Messrs. Brighthouse and Vaughan were busily engaged with Mr. Ingram's solicitors; Sir Geoffrey was living quietly at his house in the country. He would agree to any proposal from Jack or the others. He had retired into the world of his own thoughts: all else seemed

shadowy and unreal. It was only with fatigue and difficulty that he could rouse himself to attend to matters of business.

One brilliant summer's day, he was sitting at his table, in the big library that he liked better than any other room of the house. Mr. Brighthouse and two visitors—bland elderly men—were with him, making him talk or trying to make him talk.

All the windows were wide open : the sunlight poured into the room, and with it came a gentle air and the perfume of flowers. In the bright sunshine, he looked haggard, thin, and old, as he sat with downcast eyes, moodily listening to the voices of these strangers, shirking the great effort needed to use his own weary voice.

But suddenly and unexpectedly he made the effort.

"Look here—you two. Don't think me mad. If my brother Jack has sent you to find me mad, you have come on a wild goose chase," and he banged the table with his open hand ; then got up, and walked about the room while he talked to the visitors volubly, rudely, wildly.

"If Jack thinks me mad, why doesn't he send over that doctor of his—Hughes? I have asked for Hughes again and again. He daren't do it—Why? Because I trust Hughes. . . . I'll tell you what I think of you—the lot of you—you doctors. Hughes can beat you all at your own game—knows more already than you'll ever learn," and he laughed loudly and contemptuously. "You may write your medical books—twenty-three thousand volumes if you like—I'll say Pooh," and he made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. "Burn the damned books and let me hear what Hughes says——"

"My dear Sir Geoffrey, pray—pray calm yourself."

"Then don't you worry me. I tell you I am ill—I believe I am in for a serious illness—some sort of infernal putrid fever, complicated with exhausted nerves—but I am not mad—though God knows I have gone through enough to turn a man's head——"

"Well, well——"

"Look here. I have told you already. I am very sorry for

my wife. She is the victim of a conspiracy as well as myself."

"A conspiracy? What conspiracy, Sir Geoffrey?"

"Conspiracy of nature"—and he talked faster and more wildly—"with the ignorance of man. How big is a microbe?—You're always writing books about microbes, but you can't see them, you can't fight them. . . . Bodies should be buried deep enough. Half the disease in the world comes from graveyard stench—the rotting bodies taint the air. That was the beginning of influenza—the Yellow River floods—thousands of corpses floating, poisoning the air . . .

"Look here, all three of you. If my wife cares to join me on a yacht, I'll buy a yacht and we'll get away—where we can breathe pure air—the South Sea Islands."

He had made his effort. Going back to his chair at the table, he sat down wearily, and his words came slow as he addressed Mr. Brighouse.

"Send for Hughes. I want to see my own doctor—Dr. Hughes. I have told you so ten times or more. . . . Ten times ten times ten."

The effort had worn him out. He sat with hanging arms, drooping head, closed eyes.

The hours, or the sense of the moving hours, seemed to have slipped away. Sunshine and dusk were merging: more and more completely he was losing himself in his own thoughts: all things external to himself, except when he concentrated his mind-upon them, were ceasing to exist.

Late on that evening or some time next morning—he could not say if it was night or morning—he looked up and found young Dr. Hughes by his side. He pressed the doctor's hand, clung to the doctor's arm, and shed a few tears in his surprise and pleasure.

"Hughes, my dear fellow—you have come at last. Look here. You know what you said about the nerves—and rest. I want my nerves rested without a moment's delay. Let them have a rest-cure or they'll give out altogether."

"Yes. I'll attend to that for you."

"I knew I could trust you, Hughes. I'll go anywhere you tell me. Put me away in a nerve-rest-cure-house—not a *madhouse*. . . . Or, stay—I don't care which. I trust you. You'll let me come out when I want to?"

"Yes."

"Don't let them lock me up—or bury me alive—or keep me when I'm rested and all right. Promise. You'll make it your business to watch over me?"

"Yes," said Dr. Hughes, "I promise."

"I'm going to be ill—I know that. But I shan't worry now. I shall trust you. I can trust you."

With Dr. Hughes and his servant he went in drowsy contentment on his long dream-journey—by carriage—by train—down the line—beyond Exeter—by carriage again: to the large white house with the big gardens and the high garden walls.

Then came darkness and confusion: long years, as it seemed to him, spent at the white house.

He is very ill—always in bed, if he could but remember it. Always in bed—safe in his bed. So they say—so they *think*, perhaps.

Darkness and confusion. The old pain in the thought of one's impotence. Thoughts rolling in chaos, as the universe rolled till suns and worlds were made—till dusky specks like this little earth shone with reflected light in the midst of limitless space. He is tortured by this emergent thought of the immensity of the universe—worlds-without-end-amen. And he an insect dimly groping, something infinitely small threading the maze of things infinitely great, seeking to hide from the stupendous outward forms and inward meanings . . . called upon to take control: to guide, rule these vast unchained primal forces, stop the chaos, rearrange the universe, set it going steadily, rhythmically—tick, tick, tick—like the marble clock in the hall downstairs. . . .

"No, no, I can't do it. You will drive me mad—unless you get that order rescinded."

Horror even in escape. A dark abyss to hide in, if one dared throw one's self down. And merciless men pricking one with morphia needles—stinging and pricking one to the plunge over the brink. Ah! . . . Then the headlong plunge into the dark vault of dreamless sleep.

Then—strength after great weakness—elation again : pride in the sound of that grandly ringing voice. Listen. Is it our own voice that harangues the men who stand round our bed and tremble at our majesty and might ?

"I am the resurrection and the life. Amen, amen, amen. Worlds-without-end-amen."

Was that his voice or a dream voice ?

Years, as it seemed, and then he is slowly getting well again : has risen from the shadowy depths to the sunlit surface.

Every day he is growing stronger. He spends long hours in the open air, watching men that dig, birds that fly, in the walled garden. The birds are free, and can fly away. Will he ever get out himself ? What was the name of that man ? Hughes. Is it summer or winter ?

Now, he digs in the garden with the others. Of an evening he plays billiards with one of the doctors. He is cured—completely cured. The sense of the moving days has come back to him : each day is like the last. He has been cured for many days : Dr. Hughes should remember his promise.

In truth it is only ten months since his wedding day, when they tell him that he and the birds share this great boon—freedom. The white house will not hold him if he wishes to leave it. Dr. Hughes has been here three times ; brother Jack has been here once ; two bland elderly men—whom Sir Geoffrey does not remember having met before—have also been here.

All concur : Sir Geoffrey is sane. Difficult—if not impossible—to keep him under restraint if he desire his liberty.

One day he dressed himself with unusual care. Brother Jack was coming to spend the afternoon with him. Looking at himself in the glass, he realized how greatly he had changed in a year. He was bearded, and the beard was all grey; the hair above his ears was white; he was an old man: he looked sixty at the very least, and he was only forty-two.

Arm-in-arm with Jack he walked in the garden; and then, after fetching coats from the house, the brothers sat together on a garden bench and watched the light and the colour in the western sky till they faded. Geoffrey talked calmly of the future and of the past: of what he would do this summer, and of what he and Jack had done in far-off happy summers when they were boys together. And it seemed to him that Jack and he were one again in heart and thought: that almost all the old love was there. No contempt or hard practical criticism in Jack's voice to-day—nothing but tenderness, sympathy, and love, with the old boyish terms that he had not used for twenty years: "dear old chap," "Geoffie," etc., etc.

Jack craved his brother's company for all the summer.

"Come to us, dear old boy, and make your home with us. You shall be master of your own time," etc., etc., etc.

But Geoffrey could not accept this invitation. Family life would not suit him. He must go his own way. But he would be quite safe, with an attendant—from this establishment—to look after him: he would live quietly, but not in solitude—London, most likely. Jack need have no anxiety on his account.

"Leave me in peace, Jack. That's all you can do to help me—don't worry me—let me have peace."

"My dear old Geoff."

"I feel sure now that it won't be for long. I shan't live many years—and then everything will be yours. You'll be a credit to the family—I couldn't be. . . ."

"Why shouldn't you live long—if you take care of yourself?"

"My nerves must be worn out—they must be like the strings of an old piano: ready to snap at any moment."

X

He was living now in London—at one of the magnificent new hotels. In all things he had been guided by skilled advice. Solitude to be avoided : cheerful, even noisy, surroundings to be sought, together with strange faces, chance companions rather than old friends, healthy exercise, harmless amusement—whatever the experts ordained he made his law.

Thus he dined in the public rooms, smoked in the crowded hall, was always ready for a walk with his watchful good-tempered servant. With the servant he went often to the theatre, to picture galleries, to lectures. The servant was his shadow ; but he made no complaints, never tried to throw off the shadow.

He was docile, amenable, deferential in his attitude towards wise experts—he was cured and safely to be trusted. After a time he walked about the streets unattended. It was the servant's suggestion, not his. But on one of these walks, turning suddenly and retracing his steps, he came upon the servant unexpectedly. The man was seated in a four-wheeled cab, was endeavouring to escape his master's observation. Sir Geoffrey understood at once that the man had been following him in the cab, discreetly guarding him still ; but he was not in the least angry. This was all as it should be : the man was only doing his duty. He drove home with his servant in the cab, told the man explicitly that he quite understood the state of affairs and did not resent this espionage.

But, after that day, he surmised that the man followed him no more. Such assiduous care was being relaxed : each day the man became less of a keeper and more like an ordinary valet. Sir Geoffrey, after a long unshadowed walk, would find him in the hotel bedroom, quietly putting out dress clothes, etc., asking for orders and not offering suggestions.

It was only when he had lost this man's constant company that he realized how irksome such company had been. The new freedom meant the recovery of unimpeded thought. The

man had been respectful, not unduly talkative : but he had perpetually interrupted one's thoughts, broken the drift of one's musing by sudden calls for attention. He made one look at every unusual object encountered.

"See that, Sir Geoffrey ? That grand carriage ?"

"No. What was it ?"

"A tremendous turn-out—coachman and footman in livery like some duke's—and just a shop-carriage really—an advertisement."

"Was it ?"

"They don't lose customers for want of advertising, do they, Sir Geoffrey ?"

"No, they are most enterprising."

That was the sort of thing—necessity to come out of one's thoughts and speak : very irksome. But now he was free to go on thinking. A sense of great relief in this freedom.

And for another reason he was glad to be rid of the man. There were places that he wished to visit—a house that he wanted to look at again, a neighbourhood in which he would like to saunter. Somehow, often as he thought of it, he had not felt able to go to Chelsea if he must take the man with him.

Now he could go there whenever he chose—as often as he chose.

On many days he walked to Chelsea, round the house, out again into the noisy King's Road, and away by the quiet streets towards the river ; and as he walked, he thought now always of the dead girl—Violet.

It was the pleasant month of April—sunshine and showers, but good weather for walking, not too cold for lounging and sauntering. There was an archway, that led to a builder's yard, at the top of the street in which stood the big house. Beneath this archway he sheltered himself from a passing shower late one afternoon ; and, standing here, he could see the

hall door and now and then lodgers going in and out. Long after the rain ceased he stood watching—till dusk changed to darkness and a man came out and lit the lamp over the door. In the grey dusk the figures of unknown lodgers going into the house had seemed to him like ghosts—and he had been wondering if he would see her among them.

He tried not to think of her, but thought of her always. It was an obsession. He should not think of her—because, when thinking of her, the sadness of the thought had driven him mad. Looking back to last year, he remembered it all. It had seemed that she would never forgive him, that he was a man doomed to an intolerable punishment, that he was to be haunted implacably. He shuddered as he remembered those most horrible illusions. The nauseating odour of corruption that used to creep into the sunlit room poisoning the fragrance of the summer flowers—it was horrible even in memory. But that was all over. Had she forgiven him?

Walking or standing at street corners to look about him, sometimes he dreaded, sometimes he longed for, illusions. If he were to see her—or to hear her? But he never saw her. He could think of her words, could make them sound in his memory—"Oh, be kind to me"—but he did not really hear her voice. He knew that he had not heard it. Only memory of the sound—no illusion. Walking thoughtfully homeward to his hotel, he wished that he might hear her voice.

Then one day, towards dusk, when he was walking very slowly, deep in thought, he felt her hand upon his arm. It was light as in life—not heavy and crushing. She had come to him: she had slipped her hand through his arm: and they walked on together. She was silent, invisible, impalpable except as to her right hand and wrist; but she was walking by his side—for an hour and more.

This is a secret that he will share with none.

No more discussion with Dr. Hughes or any of them—it is beyond the range of their thought, too deep for the plummet

lines of science, too sacred for investigation by the curious and the sceptical. There is warm diffused comfort to brain and nerves in the certainty that it is a fact. It can have only one explanation ; and he alone of all living men holds the key to the mystery. She has forgiven him.

He can sleep now calmly as a child. He is at peace with the living and the dead. She has walked with him to-day, has taken him for a long walk : to-morrow she will walk with him again. His last thought of nights, as he sinks into refreshing sleep, is : " Where will she take me to-morrow ? "

Most jealously he guards his wonderful secret.

Only one thing worried him now, and that was a transient trouble. But it was difficult sometimes to understand her wishes. Walking with him, she gave him little guidance ; yet, if he did not go in the direction she had chosen, she was angry and punished him.

That was how he read the signs or manifestations. Her hand on his arm was light as a feather while she was content, but in a moment it would become heavy as lead. That meant that she was angry, and her anger filled him with fear. He must turn and walk in another direction. Then, if he was going the right way now, the hand was light again. Once or twice she dragged his arm down beneath a dreadful dead weight ; once or twice she clasped his hand and struck him to the spine with a deadly cold.

After such a manifestation he would pause bewildered, hesitating, in doubt where to turn.

For two or three days he had been trying and failing to read her wishes. She would go to the river no more. She would go northward, through Hyde Park, away past the Marble Arch, down the ugly Edgware Road. He had thought he could understand : she was taking him out to the north-west—to the graveyard with the iron gates. But he had

misunderstood. Day after day she turned him somewhere near the canal, walked him back, made him cross and recross the road and saunter first on one pavement then on the other—confusing him, distressing him, filling him with fear.

Now of a sudden she stopped him violently, dragged his arm, and held him outside a shop window.

It was a mean little shop—a second-hand dealer's—and the window was crowded with worthless rubbish, nearly all of which carried tickets or placards that offered a uniform legend: "Good as new." Pieces of furniture, musty old books, yellow-paged magazines, china, glass, clocks, walking-sticks and umbrellas, a telescope, a set of billiard balls: all "good as new"—and, amidst the dusty trash, something clean and bright, at which he was now staring with fixed eyes.

"Army pattern first-class revolver, forty-two shillings. Good as new."

His own revolver? Impossible to doubt. The dully glittering weapon of release, which he had given to her, which she had used. This was why she had brought him here. Even as he thought of it, the invisible hand closed upon his arm and drew him into the shop.

In the shop, when the revolver had been brought from the window, he easily persuaded himself that he could recognize it—that he had truly identified it. There were in fact no marks of identification that he could look for—no mark or sign of his own making. His revolver had borne the words he was studying now: "Army Model"; "Webley Patents." His own revolver, or one of thousands of revolvers exactly like it? He himself had no doubt. Nothing that the shopman said corroborated his belief or tended to shake it.

"Yes, I will buy this. But I want you to tell me how it came here."

"Well," said the shopman, "as to that, I couldn't tell you, sir. We've had it a long time—pretty near two years; but it's in perfect condition—good as new. It come through my partner, not me. He picked it up with a lot of other things."

"Where are the cartridges? I want the cartridges."

"Cartridges, sir? Oh, you'll have no difficulty in getting cartridges to fit it. Army pattern, you see—any gunsmith can supply 'em."

"But weren't there cartridges with it? There should have been about seventeen—in a tin box."

The shopman looked at the customer in surprise.

"What say, sir? . . . But, stop a minute: I believe there did use to be cartridges along with it. Half a minute, sir, and I'll look. If they're anywhere, they're in here;" and he opened the drawer of one of the second-hand bureaux, and fished out all sorts of refuse.

"They dab things away anywhere, you know, sir, and expect one to find 'em. Look here, sir. What about these?"

He had fished out five or six dusty cartridges, and was offering them on the palm of his dusty hand.

"Yes," said Sir Geoffrey. "Those are they. But aren't there any more of them? Can't you find a tin box with the others?"

The man could find no more cartridges.

"Very well. These will do. How much shall I pay you for them?"

"Oh, we'll throw 'em in free gratis. No charge for them, sir. . . . Here, let me roll it round in brown paper, sir. Then you can put it in your coat pocket and it won't soil the lining, sir. It's been oiled to keep it from rust."

He walked away slowly, and her hand on his arm was light as a feather. He could just feel that it was there—nothing more. She was content with him—not angry. He had done what she wished: he need not fear her now. She would not turn him again: she would take him now straight on for a long, long walk—to the field of death, where she lay hiding beneath the ground when she was not by his side.

The pleasant spring day was waning; the yellow light was

rising in the western sky ; men and girls, strolling arm in arm, came out from villa gardens and met them on the broad pavements ; and they too walked like lovers going homeward, happy and contented after work is done.

In the shadow beneath a railway bridge she checked him gently, and he felt her lips on his forehead and on his mouth. They were light and warm as in life. She had forgiven him ; she loved him ; she and none other was his bride.

The gate-keeper at the cemetery looked grudgingly and suspiciously at his smiling face, and would have liked to prevent him from entering by the iron gates.

"It's time to shut the gates in ten minutes, sir. Don't seem much good going in now—for ten minutes. Can't you come again to-morrow ?"

Then he gave the man money, and the man drew aside, touched his hat, as they passed in.

When he came to the wooden crosses and unnamed graves, she left him. He stood alone among the grass-covered mounds while slowly and carefully he loaded the revolver. Where was she ? Hiding here, there ? A sound made him start and look round. It was the paper in which the revolver had been wrapt : the evening breeze had stirred it, sent it fluttering above the rank grass between the graves. He had thought it was the rustle of her dress.

"Violet !"

He was kneeling over a grave, with lowered head, as he called to her softly.

"Violet, where are you ? What is it you want me to do ? I am ready now. Tell me if I am to do it."

Then he saw her.

She had risen through the earth and was standing before him with outstretched arms—not as she is in death, but as she was in life. Her arms were about him as he raised himself from his knees. They were linked together, breast to breast. Her lips pressed his lips in a long kiss of pardon and peace ; and then, lifting his right arm, she drew back her face, slowly

turned his hand and wrist, and put the cold muzzle of the revolver to his mouth.

The sound of the shot rang out loud and clear on the cool evening air, sent birds flying again from their roosting-place in lilac bushes near the wall, startled horses on the cab-rank outside the wall, and brought the gate-keeper running down the gravel path towards the paupers' graves.

It was time to close the gates: the gate-keeper had been looking for the tall gentleman who smiled at him and gave him money ten minutes ago.

The gate-keeper found him lying face downwards across one of the nameless graves—with the red blood flowing from him, soaking the grass, making horrible rivers and pools.

The gate-keeper dared not touch him: he fled away in terror, shouting for help, for doctors, for police. But nothing could have been done—the gentleman was quite dead. The doctor said so—Nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.

AN AMATEUR

OLD Mrs. Pike was quite well-to-do. She lived in a comfortable little cottage—one of a row of four, with separate front gardens—at Isleworth. Her husband was long dead, but she had grandnieces and nephews: who came down to see her on Sundays, to admire her wardrobe full of nice clothes, her coloured pictures of King, Queen, etc., her china, glass, and crockery, her pot-plants, crochet-work, and the illuminated Bible on the desk in the window. These relatives—together with the neighbours—respected her, paid court to her, because they all understood that she was really well-to-do.

“I calculate,” hard-headed nephews by marriage would say behind her back, “your old aunt has put by her four or five hundred pounds—and she can’t last for ever, can she? We best go down and see her.”

To her face they would say: “You take care of yourself, auntie. Remember, good people are scarce. I was on’y telling my wife this morning: ‘If your dear aunt will but take care of herself, please God she’ll last for many a long year to come.’”

“I ’ad the doctor ’ere three times this week. It’s a great expense.”

“Never you mind the expense, aunt. You can *afford* it.”

“That’s as may be,” Mrs. Pike would say. Of course, she made a poor mouth with all these too-attentive relatives. “I’ve saved a little, but it makes one tremble to see it all coming out again to go into the doctor’s pockets.”

It would have made relatives tremble also, had they believed that this was happening ; but they did not believe.

"Ah," they said, still paying court, but with respectful badinage, "we're too old birds to be trapped by your chaff. My dear old aunt—as we consider you in our hearts, though only by marriage—you have your annuity."

"Such as it is."

"Twenty-five shillings a week—and a very nice income, too ; and, my dear aunt, long may you enjoy it !"

She was not so very old—say, just short of seventy : a hard, dried-up little woman, wiry and alert, strong on her legs, active as any old cat if she wished to be so, but inclined to be lazy in her old age, as became a lady of means and position. Her small, grey eyes shone bright from her small, wrinkled face, and sometimes had a playful glitter in them.

Truly, as she sat in her front parlour, she was so extremely comfortable that she could afford to look through the latticed panes and laugh at all the world. In fact, she did so often. She had a strong natural sense of humour.

She liked the good doctor's visits, and never really grudged him his modest fees. She liked to see his carriage drive up to the little gate ; she liked to watch the neighbours come out of their doors to watch the carriage ; she liked the doctor's call, for the sake of her self-importance, the pleasant chat—and, above all, because she honestly intended to take the greatest care of herself and so to last for many, many years, as her relatives kindly wished.

"Well, Mrs. Pike, how do you find yourself ?" asked the clever doctor, on a bright November morning.

"Poorly, doctor, very poorly."

She had been feeling somewhat below par for over a fortnight, and was nervously anxious.

"I tempt myself with all I can think of," she said plaintively ; "but me appetite is not what it should be. . . . I sleep heavy. Don't seem to want to get up—don't seem to take interest in nothing."

"Liver sluggish. You should walk more—have a good walk while the sun is shining."

"Ah. I do cross the ferry—and set on a seat in the sun—doing me crochet-work."

"Not enough, Mrs. Pike. You want rousing. . . . Now, look here. Do you like the theatre?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Very well. Then here's a ticket for a fine performance almost at your door," and the kind doctor handed his patient a pink card. "The Assembly Hall."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Mrs. Pike. Then, as she studied the card, she made a wry face. "On'y a pack of amerchoors!"

"Well, amateurs are very often better than professionals."

"That's a new tale."

"They'll tell you so themselves," and the kind doctor smiled. "You must consider, Mrs. Pike: Amateurs are not pressed for time; they can throw themselves into their art without sordid care; their bread does not depend on their success. It is all for art's sake. . . . You go to the play and enjoy yourself."

"All right," said Mrs. Pike. "I'll promise to go. But"—and the glitter was in her eyes—"but I can't promise anything else."

In the afternoon, Mrs. Pike went down to the ferry, crossed the river, and strolled along the tow-path. The sun was still shining; there was no wind, only a pleasant crispness in the air; clouds, which, seen through lattice-panes, seemed dark and threatening, had risen, shredded, and floated away in the sunlight. It was a glorious, bright, autumn day, and she chid herself for the over-caution that had made her choose from her ample wardrobe the oldest and shabbiest clothes rather than risk a spot of rain on her second-best bonnet and mantle.

She sauntered lazily; then very soon seated herself on a bench, to bask in the sun while she mused or smiled or plied

her crochet-needle. She never made the smallest excursion without bringing some piece of crochet-work in her pocket.

Before her were the flats of Syon ; the rich autumn tints of the foliage ; the broad river flooding full, slowly bearing the gold and red of fallen leaves, slowly bearing a noisy tug with a long tail of clumsy barges. Behind her was the narrow moat, choked with dead leaves ; the wide meadows of the Old Deer Park ; the white Observatory ; and, in the distance, red-coated golf-players. High above her head, high above the bare heads of the trees, birds were flying here and there, wheeling, diving, soaring in motiveless joy, and her thoughts were like the birds : aimless, happy, free.

"Yes," she thought, as the tug went puffing by. "That's a lot of noise about nothing. Let 'em alone, and them barges 'd come up all by themselves on the top of the water."

Then, turning her head, she thought about the golf-players.

"Grown men, too. Wonderful ! Looking like so many monkeys in their red jackets, let loose off the pianner-organs."

Then an old gentleman came strolling by, and she thought of him. He had his hands behind his back ; he glanced at her, and smiled at her as he passed.

"Lor' ! What a nice gentleman ! Looked at me that kind and compassionate. I suppose I appear like some old beggar-woman in these togs," and she examined her sleeve.

"'Pon me word, I ought to be ashamed of meself," and she chuckled as she resumed work with her needle.

Her thoughts were busy now, and had ceased to wander. Soon the needle stopped, and she laughed heartily. "Plenty o' nice clothes at home—and me to come out like this—so as people pity me ! . . . If I'd 'a' thought of it quick enough, 'pon me word, I'd 'ave 'ad a bit of fun with him. . . . Lor' ! He's coming back."

The old gentleman had turned and would pass her again. When he came to the bench for the second time, Mrs. Pike had put away her crochet. She was sitting with her hands clasped in her lap ; her face and attitude suggested patience,

resignation, extreme weariness ; and when he glanced at her, she spoke in a low, sad voice.

"Sir, *could* you grant me a copper? I have to walk to Kingston before night—and *I am* so tired—oh, so tired."

"Eh—what? To Kingston? That's a long way. . . . Yes—of course I will," and the kind old fellow sought in his trouser-pocket, gave her fourpence, smiled compassionately, and then walked on.

"Lor'," said Mrs. Pike to herself. "Lor'. Think o' that! If I'd been starving, I wouldn't 'ave got it. But just because I didn't care either way——"

Till the old gentleman was out of sight, she sat with the money in her hand. She was frightened by her success. A joke is a joke, but—— Then all at once she began to laugh again. She laughed till she cried, till she nearly choked herself with a cough ; and then sat wiping her eyes and shaking.

"I'm an *amerchoor*—that's what I am. . . . What did doctor say? Bit of art for art's sake. Oh dear, oh dear—funniest thing ever 'appened to me in all my born days!"

She thought of it all that evening, nearly all night ; and she was thinking of it as she bustled down to make her breakfast in the morning. The day promised to be fair, but she dressed once more in her shabby old clothes. She had her midday chop an hour earlier than usual, then walked briskly to the river, crossed by the ferry, and trudged along the tow-path in the direction of Richmond. And as she went, she *begged*.

Before she reached the railway bridge she had taken twopence ; in Cholmondeley Walk she took a penny ; but thence on to Buccleuch House she took nothing at all. Near the other bridge she made the mistake of thinking a boatman was a gentleman, and telling him she had to walk all the way to Kingston. He advised her to run instead of walking, and she would get there all the quicker. She was very angry as well as a little frightened, and, if she did not act on the boatman's advice, she certainly walked on as fast as she could.

But in the pretty Petersham meadows she took a shilling in

one go. This was the first silver her art had brought her, and she crowed to herself.

"A whole shilling!" she murmured, when the kind lady had gone on. "Oh, you blooming old amerchoor!" and then, in an access of gleeful art, she did what the best professional might have done. She pretended to spit on the coin for luck.

Crowing and chuckling, she resolutely climbed the hill to the "Star and Garter." She glanced at Richmond Terrace; but, deciding against it as dangerous—keepers, peelers about—turned, and went on through the gates to draw Richmond Park.

She enacted exhaustion on many seats with varied success, until the light failed and she felt tired. She had taken three shillings and elevenpence, and, as she came down the hill, her face shone and she was walking jauntily, almost skipingly.

The red sunset was glorious; beneath the splendid glowing sky there was a sea of grey mist—a grey sea which rolled over the valley, and through which the lamp-lit windows of houses on the lower road twinkled faintly, as if they had been fairy lamps in fairy caverns deep down beneath the water. And Mrs. Pike enjoyed it all. She had a cup of tea and a bun near the bridge, caught the Isleworth 'bus, went home, ate her supper with a ravenous appetite, and slept like a top.

Henceforth, she walked regularly, going farther and farther afield, begging sturdily, astounded by the amount of her takings. Half-a-crown was a rotten bad day. In a good week she had taken as much as twenty-eight shillings—three shillings more than her weekly income from the great insurance office.

She attributed all her success to the fact that she was an amateur. She was irresistible, because she could throw herself into her part as a true artist without carking care. She was always repeating the word, playing upon the humorous idea the word embodied, chaffing herself openly, and secretly chaffing all the world. "An amerchoor! Just a blessed amerchoor! . . . Madam, I don't like to ask it of you, but I am very 'ungry.'" Then, perhaps when the dole was curtly refused: "Thank

you, madam. I did not expect it—I 'ad no right to ask it of you—but, alas ! I am 'ungry."

Then she who had refused would come back and give. The old woman was irresistible. Something of dignity and resignation in the proud yet piteous tone went straight to the heart. No well-to-do lady could tramp on and think of this mendicant—old, lonely, and "'ungry"—without stopping, turning, yielding.

Mrs. Pike's difficulty on such occasions was to refrain from laughing in the benefactor's face.

Sometimes, with a forlorn, half-witted, *real* beggar, she would have a bit of the purest fun in relieving and mocking at his misery.

"Oh, my pore feller ! Just take this sixpence."

"Gawd bless you, ma'am, for your kindness ! It's the first coin I've taken since last Wednesday."

"O my pore man, I quite believe yer—and I dare say it isn't for the want of asking. But poor fellers like you aren't attractive—and it's a very 'ard world."

This sort of fun, however, she indulged in with caution. In truth, she dreaded the professional beggars, and gave them a wide berth. If they got wind of her joke, who knows but they might waylay her, rob her, beat her, pitch her into the river ? She dreaded the professionals and their rough ways. She also dreaded the police, and ever had a wary eye. A joke's a joke, but——

Naturally, she could share her joke with none. She hugged it to herself, counted her gains behind locked doors, was strong enough to know herself a great and successful artist, and yet not speak about it. But she told the doctor of her long walks, her improved health, her hearty appetite, and her renewed zest in life. She rested the seventh day, and the doctor used to come and see her now on Sunday mornings.

"Well, now, to be sure," the doctor said, "an eight-mile walk yesterday ? Grand ! And you look as fit as a racehorse. But don't overdo it, Mrs. Pike. You mustn't overdo it."

"No, sir, that's what I tell myself. I mustn't overdo it."

"Well, I consider you a wonder."

"Do you, sir? Upon me word, sometimes I think I *am* a wonder," and the old dame crowed and chuckled.

Towards Christmas her receipts went up into splendid figures. At this glad season of the year, when streets were frost-bound, and holly hung in butchers' shops, it seemed that people could not give enough to the little, wrinkled, white-haired old woman in black. Never before had nieces and nephews been gratified by such fine Christmas presents from Aunt Pike. She devoted the gross receipts of three days' performance to her presents, and made holiday till the New Year.

But in the first week of the New Year her takings dropped—almost to nothing. Then she overdid it. She was near to the new Parade between Kingston and Surbiton; and, nettled by her failure, she began to overplay the part: was insistent, importunate, lost to all sense of proportion—trotting after people, whining, groaning, ranting to make her effect. People with unpaid Christmas bills in their pockets told her to go to the devil. A pleasant-faced, middle-aged man, whom she was worrying, warned her. A stolid-faced, stupid oaf of nineteen—not a gentleman—stared at her in silence as she trotted by his side on the Parade. Then, in a moment, a policeman sprang down the path from the high-road, and nabbed her.

"You come along with me. I've been watching you for half an hour."

The middle-aged man did all he could for her. He pooh-poohed the constable.

"All a mistake, officer. Let her go, and say no more about it."

The constable liked being called "officer," but he was firm in his duty.

"I saw her soliciting alms off you, sir."

"Oh, no, my good fellow," said this pleasant-faced man. "We were talking about the weather, I assure you. I was the one to begin the conversation."

"She begged off me," said the young lout ; and no protest or denial from Mrs. Pike would shake him. "Yes. You begged off me."

Mrs. Pike was marched to the police-station, to be charged and tried before the magistrates.

The case aroused much indignation at Isleworth. All who knew her were indignant. Poor old Mrs. Pike ! What next ? People felt that no one could be safe from insult by the crassly stupid police.

Neighbours, friends hastened to offer evidence. Nieces flocked down from London. Mrs. Pike's regularly paid attendant doctor came over in his carriage.

The accusation was monstrous and absurd. This most respectable person was well-to-do—for a person in her position, a person of largely ample means—not flighty, cracky, or anything else derogatory. Seventy years of age, if that be a crime—but *mens sana in corpore sano*.

The charge was, of course, dismissed. It should never have been preferred. The chairman of the bench of magistrates suavely apologized to Mrs. Pike and sternly censured the oafish young man.

Mrs. Pike in court was great—very great. She said, inimitably, to the lout in the box : "I arst you the time, and you gave me a saucy answer, and I give you a piece of my mind. Then you think you'll revenge yourself by getting me into disgrace, and you tells your tarradiddles to the policeman."

Leaving the court—without a stain on her character—she said to the young man : "Let this be a lesson to yer."

Then she added to herself : "Yes, and let it be a lesson to me. I got impident on me success—just like an *amerchoor*."

GRANGE AND SON

I

MANY people in Brayton thought that old Mr. Grange, of Grange and Son, had closed a cautiously successful business career by an astounding act of folly.

People looked at him and spoke of him as he walked about the town, stood upon the stone bridge and watched the running water, or, leaving behind him the noisy streets and the noisy railway station, strolled on the meadow paths between the river and the canal. A tall grey man, with a Panama hat, which he carried sometimes in his strong bony hand ; dressed in a grey suit of no fashion ; wearing his goat-like beard after the manner of Americans ; with close-shut mouth, big nose, bushy eyebrows over keen grey eyes—nothing, in truth, remarkable or unusual to cause one to look at him ; and yet one always looked.

“There he goes,” said the inhabitants of the flourishing Midland town. “Just like a man in a dream—never seeing you, if you touch your hat to him—out of politeness. He was one of the biggest men in Brayton, and now he is no more than a pensioner in his son’s house.”

This was what had happened :—

Grange and Son were an old-established, prosperous firm. Except the church and the ruined castle, Grange’s Pottery Works was the oldest thing in Brayton. The original red-brick quadrangle was built at the time when the canal was cut—1775. The first barge to float on the new water carried directors, county magnates, the lord-lieutenant, etc., but the second barge carried china-clay for Grange’s. Here, in the

angle formed by river and canal, the works had spread themselves ; here, during all the years, within sight of the pleasant beechwoods and the stretching moorland, Grange's had made porcelain, earthenware, stoneware, glazed tiles, choice bricks, terra-cotta door lintels, drain-pipes ; here had reigned, like small princes of industry, Grange after Grange. Death transferred the principality from father to son always. Never till the last reign had any prince abdicated.

Old Henry Grange, of the Panama hat, ruling his prosperous realm cautiously and wisely, was a happy prince. The revenue from the works was steadily rising—six thousand, seven thousand, eight thousand a year flowed from the solid trade. Why push and strive and lie awake at night when one was making more money than one could spend ? Old Henry built for himself, his good wife, and his three children a house which in Brayton appeared to be almost a palace. It was a noble stone mansion on the high-road, just outside the town : not exactly a town house and not quite a country house—it really looked as if it had come from Piccadilly or Park Lane to astonish Brayton. Without and within it was splendid—iron gates, immense lamps, balustrades, marble vases, a mahogany door big enough for the Bank of England ; grand hall and double staircase, suite of lofty reception rooms, parquetry, velvet curtains, tapestry curtains. Surrounded by these splendours the head of the family lived still modestly and wisely, not in the least caring if parlourmaids were incongruous in those lofty halls, or if the old-fashioned three-course dinner was almost an insult to the vast dining-room.

Young Henry, the only son, was given a sound commercial education—Repton, Bonn, Paris, Lambeth—and on his twenty-first birthday was taken into the business as a partner ; and henceforth the firm was Grange and Son in fact as well as in name.

Mr. Henry, junior—tall, smart, good-looking—proved himself an untiring worker, in spite of his youth and his natural and acquired charms. He thought of nothing but the business,

of expanding and pushing it on and on to bigger and bigger things. He was at the works early and late ; ambitious dreams made him toss and turn on his soft pillow in the fine stone house.

"Sir," he used to say to his father, "I have an idea," and his face used to flush with excitement. "Do, sir, let me go to Derby and see if I can't push our new foot tiles with the railway people."

He always called his father "sir," and his mother loved the sound of it.

"It sounds old-fashioned," the good dame would tell her friends ; "but I like the old fashions. I think the old fashions are the best. My boy is a comfort to his father. . . . Yes, we have been blessed in our children. Mrs. Sells—I am speaking of my elder daughter, Emily—is well married. Edith, my other girl, is skilled with her pencil. She has painted her father's portrait. She has taken him to the life, but the expression is too severe. That is the only fault."

"My dear mother is showing signs of age," young Henry would say. "She is only fifty, but—since this last winter, especially—she has shown signs of age."

You see, young Henry was quick of observation—nothing escaped him : whether it might be something wrong with mamma, or a screw loose at the works.

The boy was truly a source of comfort as well as pride to his father. Papa could not take up all the young fellow's new ideas, but he was pleased to recognize that they were often brilliant. "He is of the new generation and I am of the old," he used to think, without the least bitterness. "I seem a slow-coach to him, and he seems too flyaway to me." He refused to take up new ventures, to build, to sink capital on untried lines ; but he gave the new partner a free hand for what he called "legitimate expansion." Master Harry might attempt anything he liked in the way of "travellers" ; he might secure as many contracts as he could ; old Henry would see that the stuff was turned out.

Young Henry's efforts in this direction were crowned with success. As the years passed, papa seemed scared sometimes by the extent of this success. His son was great in getting contracts.

The old boy used to wait for business ; the son went to find business—to *make* business. He had London friends, belonged to a London Lodge of Freemasons, was a member of a London club. He would run up to London for a night or two and give dinners at his club. He was a pleasant host : offering his jolly guests the best of everything—the oldest champagne, the choicest cigars. It was all smiles and careless hospitality ; and then, just at the end, the very last thing—*business*.

“Don't run away, old chap ; finish your cigar—and, I say ! Are we all right ? Are you going to let us have it ? Don't let us lose it—for a trumpery discount. . . . Waiter ! Whisky and soda. . . . This is *masonic*. I'm not keen because of the profit hanging to it. I see you mean to knock all the gilt off the ginger-bread, you old villain. But I ask you as a pal. I want the job—for the honour of the house.”

That was how young Mr. Grange got a contract sometimes. He was all of the new style. That phrase, “the honour of the house,” was the only thing he had taken from his old-fashioned father. Papa used the phrase—on serious occasions—very pompously. The son used it, whenever it came in handy—quite lightly.

From London, in spite of all these visits, there reached the stone house no whisper of bachelor dissipation—no far-off rustle of silk petticoats or faint perfume of patchouli. He was a steady young man, who could pass through temptation without falling into vice. After so many years he still used his latch-key without abusing the privilege. He never lingered at the Brayton club. Papa and mamma, in their vast bedroom on the first floor, could hear Henry—aged thirty—let himself in and cross the stone hall and mount the stairs before 11.30 p.m. They slept the sounder for the knowledge that their

beloved junior partner was safe in his comfortable rooms on the second floor.

He was thirty-four when he told his father that he wished to get married.

"Sir, I have come to you for help."

"What is it, Hal?" and the father's hand was laid affectionately on his shoulder. "I think I can promise my help. What is it?"

It was dark-haired, graceful Mildred Carter, down at Brayford, five miles away, and Mr. Henry eagerly unfolded his new idea. The Carters were country magnates—large landed proprietors, owning a grand old house, river, woods, moors; lordly cousins, uncles, and aunts. One read in the newspapers of their autumn shooting-parties. At such epochs pretty Mildred sat at meat with as many as three lords at a time, and perhaps called one of them Cousin Dick.

"I hope, sir, I'm not a snob," and Mr. Henry's face flushed from excitement; "but, socially, it will mean a lift in the world for me."

"I don't see that," said his father, proudly. "I suppose *we* have been making nearly as long as *they* have been spending."

"Sir, I have set my heart on it. Don't say you disapprove."

"No, I won't say that. I was twenty-two when I married your mother. It is time you were married. But, Harry, will your fine lady look down on us—on your mother? Are you sure it is the girl you have set your heart on—and not the family?"

Mr. Henry said the social advantages were merely thrown in—it was the girl he wanted. And his father helped him to get her.

But before the wedding day Mr. Grange, senior, was dressed in deep black instead of sober grey. A wife was coming to the Granges, but a wife had gone from them. The head of the firm had lost the partner of his private life, and, with bowed head, walking to and fro in his office, or, with

clasped hands, walking by the swift river, he seemed like a man walking in a dream. The zest had gone from life. Nothing mattered now—or ever could matter. All zest in life had gone ; all that was real and substantial had gone ; he was a shadow walking among shadows. Thus he felt when he determined to abdicate, and had the first of many business interviews with his old friend, Mr. Lawrence, the solicitor.

Three months after the funeral and a month before the postponed wedding he told his son what he was doing.

"Henry, when you bring your wife home here, it will be to your own house. I shall make everything over to you absolutely—the business, this house, everything. I won't keep you waiting—till—till I go and lie down again by your mother's side."

Mr. Grange, junior, protested.

"Sir, you overwhelm me. You—to retire—in the prime of life ! You are only sixty."

But his father told him that he had made up his mind. In fact, he had almost accomplished the whole transfer.

"Lawrence has drafted the last deed. I have executed the others. I have provided for Emily. Edith will have an income of five hundred a year, and live here. You won't mind that ? She will be a companion for your wife. And you must harbour me, too. I shall take your old rooms on the second floor, and you must allow me two hundred a year. It is more than I shall spend, but I shall trust you to pay me so much every year."

"My dear father, indeed you may trust me. But we'll have it all in order. Mr. Lawrence must see to that. Of course I'll sign anything."

"No," said Mr. Grange, with dignity ; "*that* I won't have in writing. I prefer to trust you. Remember—I am trusting you with greater things. I am trusting you with the honour of our house."

II

Then came change—slow at first, then faster, until it seemed to him that within and without the house all the world was changing.

He was conscious of the change when he put by his black suit and, resuming his grey, began walking about the streets to fill his empty hours. The town was expanding rapidly ; there seemed to be a sudden rage for building. The Pottery Works were expanding : in one year of the new reign there had been more building here than in the last twenty years. His son was master now ; his word was law. He and his new manager were going ahead now in earnest. New tile plant, newest brick plant, terra-cotta unbelievable. Papa had been satisfied in making door lintels from stock patterns : now they were making whole shop fronts, whole terra-cotta streets, from any design the architect-artists could send them. It was their boast now that they could do at Brayton all that was being done at Lambeth.

Mr. Grange, leaning on a field gate, day after day watched men building the new embankment and bridge, laying the metals for the new sidings which would bring the Midland Railway right into the heart of the works. One day he watched an engine come puffing with a train of brand-new trucks. He had been content to see his goods carried in trucks with "M. R." on them ; but his son must own his own trucks and paint his own name on them. Old Mr. Grange started as he read the big lettering. "Henry Grange"—nothing more.

He talked to his son of the new trucks that night at dinner.

"Oh, yes," said Harry. "An economy—really. Travelling advertisements."

"But, Harry, you are not changing the style of the firm, are you ? Grange and Son—what ?"

Harry explained that "Grange and Son" had an old-world,

sleepy sound. "Grange" was really sufficient. Later on, if they ever cared to float themselves as a company, "Grange, Limited," would be just the thing.

The new order—change, expansion, push. Old Mr. Grange understood; at home or abroad he could see it. He belonged to the past; a new generation had arisen. One should not want to stop the hands of the clock.

His son never called him "sir" now. It was always "My dear father."

"My dear father, you are the honoured guest here. Ask whomsoever you wish."

This was when he had requested that his old friends, Mr. Lawrence, the solicitor, and Mr. Martin, the doctor, should be invited to dinner.

"Oh, yes, father," said pretty Mildred. "Do ask all your old cronies. Let's get up a dinner for them this week."

Dark-haired Mildred called him Father—although she had a real father five miles away at Brayford; and gave him unobtrusive love and respect always. The old man was very fond of Mildred. She was a gentle, yielding creature; and, as the years glided, he became fonder of her than of his own daughters. Miss Edith Grange was the first person to show him plainly that when a prince has abdicated, and lost the power to give or withhold, he must look for love and respect as a favour, not as a right.

Mr. Lawrence and the other old boys came to the house several times during the first year or two, and then came no more. Their friend could go and see them whenever he pleased to do so. But the stone house had changed inwardly; they were out of place there now, and felt uncomfortable.

The old servants were all gone. No more parlourmaids: a smart young butler now and two footmen, with Mr. Henry's own man to help them when people came to dinner. At great dinner-parties—in the autumn season especially—the guests sometimes brought still more footmen, and it seemed that a servant was standing behind every chair. The Carter clan,

perhaps, had come in force, whirling through the night on gigantic snorting motors—bringing two lords and a Lady Jemima with them. The electric light dazzled one in the great dining-room, flashed on bare shoulders, white shirts, white waistcoats, precious gems ; the chatter and high-pitched laughter deafened, stupefied one.

Old Mr. Grange, sitting at one of these feasts in his black tie and black waistcoat, looked solemn, incongruous, out of date. He was slow of speech, unable to spring from topic to topic : while he pondered his next remark the stream of talk rolled away from him. He fell silent, thinking. At such times as he sat thus with bent brows, all the light and strength faded from his eyes, deep lines came at the sides of his mouth, and he looked of a sudden ten years older.

Then Miss Edith would rouse him sharply.

“Father, a penny—a penny for your thoughts !” and she laughed shrilly. “Don’t go to sleep.”

She had not roused him because of her love, but because, as she once told her brother, he was looking *odd* and old and foolish.

Were his thoughts worth a penny ? Surely not—he had given all his pennies away. But his thoughts were at any rate strong and clear still, while he watched the company from beneath bent brows.

This was the new order—the new style. He must not speak ; he could only watch. Pretty Mildred was secretly bullied, overtly snubbed by her husband. He was fond of her, but he was cruel to her, breaking her spirit by petty tyranny, wounding her, stabbing her perpetually. She, too, was afraid to speak freely—even to-night with her own folk about her. You could hear the note of repression in her low voice as she talked to Mr. Dick Hartley, the new manager. Mr. Hartley, in spite of his handsome face, his smart manner, his fine relations, was a snob and a cad, if not something worse. Mr. Hartley needed close watching. Miss Edith’s bodice was disgustingly, disgracefully too low. The grandchildren—little Harry and

little Mildred—should have been sleeping in bed instead of hanging about corridors, dressed up like monkeys, waiting to come in and show themselves at dessert. No one but their mother wanted to see them. All these fine guests were liars, hypocrites, worthless shams.

A penny for your thoughts, old man.

But all these great people hung on his son's words, flattered him. He was the reigning prince now—able to bully and to brag because he was powerful and successful. The servants studied his face, feared him; all the world bowed down to him. He was bragging now—in the new style: lightly, with airy cynicism—half man of business, half man of fashion.

“No. We can't admit sentiment in business. If a man gets in your way, you must brush him aside—sweep him out of your path. It don't do to turn sentimental and think of his wife and children. We don't dare to think of all that, do we, Hartley?”

The new style. Bare shoulders and leering men. A manager who sits at your table, drinking your wine and trying to make love to your wife. A penny for your thoughts.

He was alone in the big house, really. He was alone in the world, one might almost say. The world was moving fast; the men of his time were passing like shadows from the stage of life; old friends cannot be replaced. Except for old Lawrence and one or two more, he had no real friends.

He excused himself from attending his son's banquets, and his excuses were readily accepted.

“My dear father, it is your comfort I want to study. If you prefer to have your dinner served in your own rooms,” etc.

Sometimes the children—Harry and Mildred—came up and watched him eat his sole and his cutlet, and then rushed off for the grand dessert. The servants kept him waiting sometimes for his solitary meal; but he did not complain. He was only the “honoured guest.” His son was master of the house. Doubtless the busy servants were grumbling. “And drat it all, there's that old man's dinner to be lugged up.” He must not

complain. When Charles V. abdicated, he entered a convent ; he did not go and live with son Philip at Madrid.

One winter old Mr. Grange had a touch of influenza, and stayed upstairs in his rooms on the second floor day after day for a long time.

Mr. Grange, junior, meeting the doctor in the hall on a Sunday afternoon, asked for news of the patient. "He is better in his own room, of course?"

"No," said the doctor ; "he is better out of it. I have told him he may come down to-day, and to-morrow he may go out—a little way—in the sunshine."

"Well," said Henry, as he wrapped himself in his motor-coat, "we don't want the influenza to run through the house, but we'll get him down to-morrow—to-day we are expecting company."

"Company will do him good," said the doctor, looking hard at Mr. Henry. "He is weak from his illness, but he is full of energy by nature. He is rusting from inaction."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Henry, not really listening. "Good-bye," and he hurried off to join the others in the snorting motor.

The patient came down and found the house deserted. He walked feebly, making his way from room to room, finding each empty and cheerless. At last he established himself, by the fireside of a pretty drawing-room, in a huge armchair—a true grandfather's chair. Here the children came to him and welcomed him most affectionately—little Mildred throwing her arm round his neck and clambering upon his knees, Master Harry holding his hand and patting it. Master Harry was most affectionate and winning—when he wanted anything. His grandfather would look at him thoughtfully and say, "You are like your father, Harry. You are very like your father."

Harry wanted something now. "We want you to read to us. *Do* read to us."

"My boy, I think I'm too tired to read—and there's not enough light. But I'll tell you a story. Will that do?"

They made a pretty picture—the grey old man half lost in the shadow of the big chair, and the two children hanging about him, now in the firelight, now in the shadow ; and behind them the grey dusk falling fast.

“Very well. I’ll tell you a story—the story of King Lear.”

But soon the motorists returned, and the little group by the fire were plunged into dire disgrace. The master of the house, his wife Mildred, his sister Edith, and his smart governess came into the room, and out flashed the dazzling electric light. The children were whisked away, and their grandfather was rated by all but Mildred.

It was too inconsiderate of him. Of course he had given the dear children influenza. Edith and his son both reproved him for his want of consideration.

“I was only telling them a story,” he said, as they hustled the children out of the room.

“Too bad of him,” said Edith, following her brother and the governess. “Too bad. It really is too bad.”

Alone again, the old man sprang to his feet, waved his hand above his head, and stared at the door through which his children had passed.

“Yes—by Heaven, it is too bad. King Lear ! King Lear !” and he sank down in his chair, coughing and shaking.

To him presently, as he sat alone by the fire, came Mildred, to apologize for other people’s unkindness ; to take his hand and press it ; to say, in effect, that she is very sorry that they spoke unkindly, that she is always his true friend, though she does not always dare show it.

“Father ! You understand, don’t you ?”

“Yes, my dear ; and there’s something I want *you* to understand. You have a friend in *me*—not an impotent friend, if the need ever comes.”

III

THE tragedy of it lay in this : he had loved his son with all the strength of his strong, stanch nature, had asked only to go on loving him, had tried not to see the change.

His son was not unkind ; listening to his son, he refused to hear the careless tone, to understand the slighting word. His son might sneer at the past ; but could not sneer at him. He was "the honoured guest" at the works as well as at home, and he loved to walk through the meadows and fill an empty hour by strolling beneath the archway, past the old porter's lodge, into the old quadrangle.

"Harry," he would ask, with a smile, "what's this new-fangled process of kneading your Poole clay ? You seem to be spending a lot of money on it."

"My dear father, it would take me a week to explain it to you——"

"I used to understand things quick enough, Harry——"

"Oh, yes, but times are changed, and, of course, you haven't grown younger since then."

"No ; I am old. That's true enough, Harry. I am old."

He made up his mind then that he would never return to the works, and yet he returned. His son had said a cruel thing—without thinking, by accident. He came back often, visiting only the old part of the works—the part that he loved. He loved to lounge about the old tile yards, to study the clay *weathering* in its shallow beds, to watch it *mellowing* in its water pits until it was ripe for the pug mill. Above all he loved the old quadrangle, the four kilns, and all that appertained to the famous original porcelain. The platemakers' hot-house was not too hot for him. He would stand there for twenty minutes, and, leaving it, come into the open air without a bead of perspiration on his forehead. The workmen were respectful, but feared him no more. He who a little time ago could lean 'bout of a window, shout an order, and make the whole world

tremble, was now of no more real consequence than an intelligent child watching the workmen at their appointed tasks.

One day he made an appeal to his son on behalf of old friends—Bennets, established 1805. A foreman had been telling him that the “guv’nor” meant to smash Bennets, kill them by competition, cut them out in their own little old-fashioned line, undersell them at a loss till they put up their shutters and owned themselves beat.

“Harry, is it necessary? Jack Bennet’s father and I were boys together.”

But to this sentimental appeal the “guv’nor” was no softer than a piece of his latest model stoneware. He stood on the office hearthrug, with legs apart, and harangued his father good-humouredly enough, but as a grown-up speaks to a troublesome child.

“My dear father, in business there can only be one interest—self-interest. If a man stands in your path, you must sweep him aside—brush him out of the way—smash him before he grows big enough to smash you.”

That was the last time but one that old Mr. Grange entered the office. On the last time of all, the “guv’nor” was writing at his large table. He looked up, then down at his papers, and went on writing; and when his father called his name sharply, he too spoke sharply.

“I am busy. Surely you can see that I am very busy?”

His father never visited the works again. As he walked away by the river, his face was flushed and his lips worked tremulously. He thought of the past and of the present. He thought of how little Harry had visited him many years ago—in the office—while he worked; of how the boy had fidgeted, asked questions, tampered with the letter-press, rendered work impossible. And he had said, “Wait for me, Hal, and I’ll strike work and walk home with you,” and they had gone back together, hand in hand.

Doubtless bitter thoughts mingled themselves with such recollections. Wounded pride, wounded love, anger at a slight

from youth to age, from son to father ? Hot anger, perhaps, as he thought of the long tale of such slights ? That anger of outraged love which sees no solace but in hate ?

He hated the new order, the new style. He hated the new town, the electric trams, the clock towers, the noise, the push, the vulgar bounce of it. To his eye the good old solid trade had gone : all was sham, pretence, rottenness. He hated the new, cheap, tawdry shops, opened with a flourish of trumpets to-day, silently closed in bankruptcy to-morrow. Walking through new streets, he muttered to himself :—

“Trade—no ! Bosh, bunkum, bounce, half the time—most of the time.”

Standing one afternoon on the stone bridge, he looked back at his son's new works, extensions, and improved buildings—and he hated them all. Was it solid—was it merely show ? Why, to justify such expansion their trade should have leapt into a profit of forty or fifty thousand pounds a year ! Could it be possible ?

He hated the fine-gentleman manager—this swaggering snob who rode to hounds in a pink coat and went to the works in an electric brougham, who leered and whispered with other men's wives. Another afternoon, when he had followed the running stream halfway to Brayford, he met Mr. Hartley walking and whispering with dark-haired Mildred. But Milly had said she must be with her mother to-day. What did it mean ? Those two had not met by chance.

In all the town there seemed to be only one house of business that was unchanged—unchanging. Old Mr. Lawrence, the solicitor—grey, wise, solid—did his work with three old clerks in the panelled parlours of an untouched Georgian mansion. The house stood back from the noise of the streets ; it was silent, reposeful. Mr. Grange, senior, went there often and loved it.

“Lawrence,” he said to-day, “you must do what I ask you. You must find me a weapon to use against this Hartley fellow. He's a rascal.”

"Yes, that may be ; but it's another thing to prove it."

"Work out his career—I promise you'll find proof enough. Trace out the dog's life—with detectives. Have him watched—here and in London."

"Yes, and you may have a pretty detectives' bill to pay, and then——"

"I don't mind. Do as I ask you. Make me—what do they call it in Paris?—a *dossier* ;" and old Mr. Grange chuckled fiercely. "Dossier—that's it. Give me that man's dossier."

These old men would sit in the panelled parlour and talk together by the hour. Mr. Lawrence was never too busy for a chat ; *his* work was solid ; it could wait. They had very few secrets from each other. One evening, when Mr. Lawrence's oil lamps had just been lit, Mr. Grange, senior, talked for a long time about his son's enterprise.

"Lawrence, what are they doing now ?"

"They are borrowing money again."

"From whom ?"

"Carter—and his fine friends."

"On what security ?"

"Oh, none, I should think," and old Mr. Lawrence laughed. "The great Mr. Grange's word, I should think. You know—the new style. 'Dear boy, do you want ten per cent. for twelve months? Very well ; give me all your loose thousands and don't tell any one about it.' 'Oh, thank you, Mr. Grange.'"

IV

IN such a lamp-lit hour as this, when the two old men were sitting together exchanging their old-fashioned, played-out views, the young man, Mr. Henry Grange, was alone in his lately refurnished office. The heavy curtains were drawn ; the shaded electric light glowed here and there on polished mahogany, brass handles, nickel fittings ; at his huge American bureau the "guy'nor" sat waiting for his manager. Mr.

Hartley had been in London for two days ; unless he had missed his train, he should be here soon, bringing good news or bad news. Waiting alone in the splendid, silent office, Mr. Grange, junior, laid by the smiling, self-satisfied mask that he wore before the world. One would scarcely have recognized the prosperous, opulent, overbearing "guv'nor." His face was haggard ; his lips were loose ; his fingers shook as they fumbled with the keys and drawers of his patent desk. He looked like a dreamer who has had rose-tinted dreams and awakened to drab-hued facts.

In truth it was all sham—the triumphant expansion, the glorious progress. At first the success had been real enough : a solid increase of solid trade ; then he had been carried on from substance to shadows. For a long time he had been a shadow-hunter.

Insolvent really—half of his works an outward show, each new extension a drain down which the good gold poured never to return. Every month now a fight to hide the secret : a desperate fighting for time—fighting for life. At all hazards, at all costs, the fight to maintain the credit slowly built up by father and son during a hundred and twenty years.

"What is it ?"

He looked round with a stifled exclamation.

His manager had returned ; moving silently across the thick carpet, had come to his desk, was beginning to whisper the result of the mission.

Mr. Hartley had failed to raise money in London. He had made the risky attempt in many quarters, but had failed. He had done no good ; he hoped he had done no harm. But in London they had said it was a *curious* request—people would wonder. A time loan should be obtained *locally*. Surely there could be no difficulty about so small a sum locally.

Then these two young men spoke of a date looming fatally large before them. Thirteen days to the twenty-fifth of the month. Twenty thousand pounds by the twenty-fifth—or the bubble burst.

"Hartley, get it locally. Get it—on any terms—at any price."

There were, thought Mr. Hartley, only two men in Brayton who could do it for them. One was the manager of the Great Central Bank. He could do it—if he sent to headquarters for authority, he could do it. But then it would be dangerous—it must be known. The other man was Lawrence, the solicitor.

"Old Lawrence? He hasn't control of twenty thousand pence."

"Yes, he has. He always has money to put out on mortgage—large sums. I wouldn't believe it, but they told me at the bank. He has clients' funds always passing through his hands."

"I didn't think that he had a client left. . . . But try him. It's our only chance."

Then young Mr. Grange went home in his electric brougham—a man driven by furies: awake or asleep haunted, tortured, stifled by the sense of his vainglorious failure. No thought now for wife, children, father—only dread of what was surely coming to him, and a prayer to fate, to blind chance, for escape and safety.

Old Mr. Grange came often to the quiet Georgian house to ask for "the dossier." The dossier was not ready. Old Mr. Grange was being obeyed, but he must have patience: old Mr. Lawrence was doing his best for him.

"But I have something else to talk about," said Mr. Lawrence. "I must tell you the latest development. I believe they are in their last trench."

"No?" And old Mr. Grange, listening intently, shaded his eyes with his hand.

"The man himself was here to-day, sitting in that chair. He was full of swagger—dropped in to throw something good in my way—a little confidential business."

"What was it?"

"They want," said Mr. Lawrence, impressively, "twenty thousand pounds. They want it so badly and so confidentially that they are willing to charge the whole concern—a first charge, mark you, on freeholds, business, plant, everything."

"Ah!"

"You see what that means? Overboard with all unsecured creditors. Let our fine friends fight for their money. So much for my lord's word——"

"Lawrence," and old Mr. Grange took his hand from his eyes and struck the table with his clenched fist, "it's not commonly honest—not commonly honest. What did you say?"

"I told him," said Mr. Lawrence, "I'd think about it. I told him to call again. I said: as it happened, I had so much as that in my care just now, that I might possibly lend it—for my clients—for, say, three months—they duly executing the mortgage deed that I should prepare."

"What did he say to that?"

"He was cocksure they could repay the money in three months if I would not lend it for longer. . . . I told him that the matter must be considered strictly confidential. The money, of course, would be clients' money; but, if I lent it at all, I should lend it in my own name."

V

THE fateful twenty-fifth had come and gone: young Mr. Henry had obtained his loan.

Safe—for three months. His secrets safe, at any rate, till then. Another respite—time to look about one, plot, devise, scheme; time for Mr. Hartley to go hunting again in his red coat, to meet his employer's wife and whisper to her; time for young Mr. Grange to walk, drive, eat, and sleep as a doomed man may do these things—haunted, awake or asleep, with the sense of his impotence and failure.

It was in the second month of this respite that old Mr. Grange received a note from Mr. Lawrence.

"Your dossier, as you call it, is ready. If you can come down at six o'clock I will go through it with you, and hand you copies of some interesting documents."

By a quarter to seven old Mr. Grange had mastered the pile of notes and papers on the solicitor's desk, had put his copies in his pocket, and was ready to go into the streets again.

"I'll find him at the club. Yes—yes. *Now* I think I can tackle him."

"Take care what you're about," said Mr. Lawrence. "I tell you—in spite of his bounce and all that—he'll be a hard nut to crack. Let me go with you."

"No. Our conversation must be quite private."

The December evening was chilly, and there was a drizzle of rain—no Panama-hat weather. Old Mr. Grange—in a black hat, black cape, with a woollen muffler round his neck—walked briskly, almost vigorously, through the streets, and resolutely marched into the hall of the noisy new club. Yes, Mr. Hartley was in. The visitor was shown into a small waiting or writing room, and was left to listen to the distant click of billiard balls, men's loud voices, the rattle of cue-butts on the floor.

"Good evening to you," said Mr. Hartley. "Won't you come upstairs?"

"No, thank you. We sha'n't be disturbed here, shall we? That's right. Please shut the door."

"Now, my dear sir—I am all attention."

"Mr. Hartley, I want to speak to you—about the honour of the house."

"Oh, I think *that* is in safe hands."

"Yes; I hope so. Mr. Hartley, it is in *my* hands."

"I don't quite follow you."

"Mr. Hartley, I am taking something on myself—to help my son. My son is a very busy man. He tries to look after

everything. But there is one important thing—at least—that he has neglected. So I am going to take care of that.”

“And what may that be?”

“His wife.”

In twenty minutes’ time old Mr. Grange was dictating a letter and Mr. Hartley was writing it.

“DEAR MRS. GRANGE,” wrote Mr. Hartley, to his visitor’s dictation,

“I cannot dine with you and your husband as arranged. I cannot come and see you again when your husband is at the works. I cannot meet you or write to you again. In fact, you will not again be troubled by yours respectfully,

RICHARD HARTLEY.”

“Thank you,” said old Mr. Grange, putting the letter in his pocket. At the door of the little room he turned and spoke again.

“Mr. Hartley, I have only *shown* you my weapons—don’t forget that. But I can *use* the weapons.”

He walked home briskly, with his head held higher than he had held it for years. He had cracked his nut quite in the old style. His daughter-in-law—the servants told him—was alone in the boudoir, but he did not go to her until he had brought Master Harry from the nursery. He came into the room with the boy following him.

“Harry! Now give this letter to your mother. Milly, dear, read it—read it carefully. I think you’ll understand why I wished that letter to be given to you by your son’s hand. Now run away, my boy. You have done your task.”

It seemed that little Harry’s task was to make his mother cry, for soon she was weeping most bitterly. She was gasping, sobbing, kneeling at old Mr. Grange’s feet—pouring out her heart, recounting her many wrongs, confessing her few

indiscretions, promising, vowing, imploring ; and old Mr. Grange was soothing, comforting, putting new heart into her.

“Then—father—you do trust me ?”

“Yes.”

“And what will you tell him—my husband ?”

“Nothing. I shall tell him nothing. If you have forgotten your husband, it is his own fault. I know that you could not forget your children.”

VI

THE swift months glided, and Mr. Hartley came no more to the stone house. The master of the house never noticed the fact. He had no thought for wife, children, father. He was a doomed man—reprieved once, but his respite nearly over.

February, nearly all the month of March, had slipped by. Mr. Lawrence wanted his money ; notices, urgent notices, final letters had come to the works ; the patience of Mr. Lawrence was exhausted ; he must apply to the Court, get his order for foreclosure. He pointed out that he had shown delicacy and consideration. Under the provisions of the mortgage he could have stepped into Mr. Henry Grange's office and assumed command of everything pending the satisfaction of his claim. Now there could be no more nonsense. What will you ? Business is business. It was not Mr. Lawrence's money ; it was the money of a client. The client required his money.

Alone in his office Mr. Grange, junior, thought of his doom—like a swimmer struggling in deep water, fought for life. Only time—with such a little money, and he could be saved. This twenty thousand, with, say, fifteen more, and time to look about one, and he could save himself yet ; could own that he was nearly beat, dismiss hundreds of hands, shut down three-quarters of the works, sell useless plant, and win through to safety ; tell the truth to the friends who had trusted him, and in the end pay them.

He was insolvent, he must fail ; but his failure would have nothing grand in it—a paltry failure for a paltry sum. He knew now—when April was near—that he would never raise the twenty thousand pounds required to take over this cursed mortgage. Already the whisper had gone round ; the trade firms were pressing him ; the noble, slowly built up credit was shaken ; at any minute it might fall.

Like a drowning man he clutched at straws. One last appeal to Mr. Lawrence's client. This was Mr. Lawrence's suggestion. Mr. Henry might, if he wished, satisfy himself that the solicitor could not help what he was doing. "Yes, if you wish it, a personal interview can be arranged. Yes, my client will be in Brayton to-morrow. Come with your manager and see what you can do with him. Shall we say at noon ? Very good."

The bright spring sunlight poured into the pleasant, old-world parlour, and showed the old solicitor seated at his table with an empty chair by his side ; showed young Mr. Grange sitting by the wall opposite to the table, fingering his lips, with eyes on the ground ; showed Mr. Hartley sitting on his employer's left, ready still to give support with bounce and brag and impudence, if these qualities might still serve.

"I think, gentlemen," said Mr. Lawrence, blandly, "you are before your time. My client will not keep you waiting. I have seen him this morning."

What sort of a man would he be ? All night young Mr. Grange had been thinking of it. Some landowner ? A big Derbyshire proprietor, who had been selling farms or moving his investments ? Some young lord just come into his estates ? Not one of the Carter clan ? Not any one who knew him !

"Hark," said the old solicitor, as a footstep sounded on the shallow stairs. Then, "Gentlemen, my client," as one of the old clerks threw open the door.

"Father !"

Old Mr. Grange had come into the room and was looking at his son.

"I should explain," said Mr. Lawrence. "Have I your attention, Mr. Henry? I should explain that, when handing things over to you, your father did not quite denude himself. Oh, no. That really would have been *too* foolish. On my advice, he retained considerable funds—for emergencies."

"Father ! What—do—you mean to do ?"

"By Heaven, I mean to smash you."

It was dreadful to see, it was dreadful to hear. The old man's face was flushed ; the veins stood out on his forehead ; his clenched fist was shaking ; his voice was loud and harsh, vibrating with rage.

"No friendship—or love—in business—that's what you say. Well—don't expect it now. When you find some one in your path, you brush him aside. Well, brush *me* aside. I am the man standing in your path—sweep me aside. Smash me before I smash you."

It was horrible to hear—it was horrible to think of. Rage—almost it seemed hate—flashed from beneath the grey brows. He was quoting his son's hated maxims ; he was wiping off old scores ; he was paying back slight for slight, scorn for scorn. The rancour of outraged love, the passion of revenge possessed him. The strength and force of the grey old man seemed miraculous—the explosion of an extinct volcano, the bursting into flame of a forest fire when the last sparks had long since been trampled under foot.

"And you, Hartley—you, you rascal and you blackguard—you go. Be off, I say. Be out of Brayton this night, or I'll lay you by the heels in Brayton jail !"

The gay sunshine filled the room. Mr. Hartley had gone. Young Mr. Grange was sitting with bowed head. Old Mr. Grange had sunk exhausted into the chair by his friend's side. The explosion was quite finished ; the storm of slowly

gathered anger had burst and ceased ; both of the old men were trembling.

But the old men had won. Here, in this quiet parlour, the old men had beaten the young men. Here had been fought the battle between the generations, the old style and the new ; and the old order had triumphed.

"Henry !" The old man stretched out his shaking hand towards his son, and all the anger had passed from his voice.

"Henry," he said again, "it's all right—really. I took you into partnership once. I'll do it again. We'll make a clean start. Grange and Son—once more."

"No, sir. No ; I'm done. I'd best blow out my brains."

"Henry, my boy"—and the old man crossed the room and laid a hand on his son's shoulder—"you can't do that. I am old—very old. I need your help—now—and to carry on—when I am gone. You—you can't desert me—for your wife's sake—for your children's sake—for the honour of our house."

THE FERRYMAN'S DOG

WHENEVER I hear that song of "Petersham Ferry," or, indeed, any allusion to the characters and habits of Thames ferrymen, I always think of one that I used to know.

This ferry was on the Thames, just below one of the newest locks. There was no lock there when I knew it and used it; and no one guessed that smart villas and trim tennis lawns were so soon to drive the cattle from the fields, or that the poplars on the island in mid-stream were, in such a little time, to give place to a boat-building establishment and fine red-brick boat club.

Opposite to the end of the path through the meadows where one waited, on the other side of the river, there were a rough stone causeway and landing-steps—built when the Thames was still tidal as high as this,—and a little way up the dusty road, almost hidden by a great chestnut tree, one could see a corner of a small alehouse and the tarred roofs of some boat-sheds.

I said where one waited, for one invariably had to wait: the ferryman always being on the wrong side of the water. His heavy green-painted boat was generally chained to a rusty ring in the steps; his great yellow and green sculls were neatly shipped or sometimes deposited on the top of the causeway; one could even see his coat and waistcoat carefully rolled round his tin tea-can; but the man himself was, as a rule, nowhere to be seen.

When one had hailed him—in the evening there were usually one or two dusty masons or bricklayers homeward

bound who would raise the echoes for miles with their "Ferry ahoy!"—he would come sauntering down the road with his little white dog dancing round him, give one shout back, and then whistle with great vigour as he slowly came across. If one was in a hurry, the whole business of getting across seemed maddeningly slow. His short, and apparently languid, strokes as he pulled out and set his barge's nose up stream, his stubborn disregard of the position of his destination, the crab-like drifting of the boat, and its final descent with a scrape of pebbles and rustle of the crushed reeds in the right place after all, as if by the merest chance, were all horribly irritating. But I and the bricklayers, who had, at one time or another, all handled the sculls and learnt how much easier it was to make the wrong end of the island than the right, knew that old Tom was an adept, and would back himself for half a gallon against all comers—over his own course. And if you were *not* in a hurry, the journey with Tom was often entertaining.

"'Ow's the dog? 'ow's Charlie? 'Ere, Charlie, don't that sniff sweet?" And one of the workmen would thrust a great bough of red May, that he had stolen for his wife probably, at the sharp nose of the little white dog, who would bark ferociously.

"'E's frustrate! Don't know 'isself in that 'ere silver bell the young misses at the great 'ouse give 'im. It's solid silver, sir; and the blue ribbing is the best as they make," the dog's master would say proudly as he pushed off.

"'Ere, Charlie! Come 'ere, my son. Come and 'elp your father."

Then the dog sprang up between the man's knees, stood on the seat, and, leaning his front paws on one of his master's sun-burnt hands, would sway backwards and forwards as the scull moved, whereby simulating that he, too, was rowing.

He was a rough-haired, shaggy-coated dog—always kept scrupulously clean,—an undoubted mongrel, but preternaturally intelligent. His master was a middle-aged man, with a deep, growling voice, a fringe of iron-grey whiskers, blue eyes, and a

very irregular set of teeth, the gaps in which seemed to assist him in whistling, for which art he had a reputation. I have never seen a man better or more completely sunburnt: for, as well as colouring his rough skin with the deep tint of old copper, the sun and wind had put a polish on it of which the best meerschaum pipe might have been proud. And, if ever a dog had a devoted owner—from the pampered pets of eccentric spinster patricians to the guides and guardians of ragged blindness in the streets—Charlie was certainly that dog.

"You was at the pub, on the booze again, while we and this gentleman was waiting," the workmen would say.

"No, I worn't," Tom growled. "No more than one glass 'as passed my lips since dinner. Charlie was a-singing to a commercial gent in the front parlour, who had heerd tell of the dawg and sent fur us."

"Less 'ave a song now, then. Tune up, Charlie, ole boy," they would say, and begin to whistle and chirrup and snap their fingers to encourage the performer.

If Tom was in a propitious temper, this rare treat was given us. Charlie would sit up on his haunches on the floor of the boat, and Tom would whistle the verse of a popular song. When he came to the chorus, the dog would suddenly throw back his head and chime in with a most hideous accompaniment. It was not yelping—it was not howling or barking. It was the well-sustained noise that dogs occasionally make on moonlit nights—but to Tom it was singing.

"Brayvo! Encore! Well done, Sims Reeves!" the bricklayers would shout, when they had done laughing at this performance; and, if there were strangers on board, be sure Tom got something more considerable than the usual penny for the voyage.

I remember one summer afternoon, when the cows were standing knee-deep in the water, and the fallen blossoms from the chestnut tree had made the stream white by the stone steps, and when Tom had a heavy boatload to take across. It was the last time I crossed with him. There were a lady and

gentleman and a little, yellow-haired girl, who had never met Charlie before, and who were—especially the little girl—highly captivated by him and his tricks. He had just given us a song, and the child had clapped her hands with delight, and then drawn the little creature to her lap, when her mother spoke.

“Isn’t it a dear little thing, Edie?” and then, turning to its master, “Would you care to part with your dog, or is he too much of a favourite?”

“Would you feel disposed to buy ’im, marm?”

“Well, I think we might, if you didn’t set an exaggerated val——”

“Your pardon, marm,” Tom interposed, pulling very short and very hard, “but allow me to ast a question. Would you care to part with that little Missy, if I was to tempt you with an ’ansome orfor?” And two of Tom’s bricklaying friends began to laugh behind their horny hands. Tom was evidently in form.

“She wouldn’t fret along with me if you was to ’and her over, supposing I made it worth your while, would she? ’Ere, Charlie, come ’ere, sir;” and Charlie bounded over to him. “No, marm; thank ye all the same; *my dawg ain’t for sale.*”

“No, I don’t warnt no drinks of ye, thank ye. Three-pence is my fare, if you please!” he said gruffly to the lady’s husband, as that gentleman paid him on landing.

“That was a rare good ’un, worn’t it?” one of the dusty workmen said to me, as we walked up the white road from the ferry. “Tom sell ’is dog? Haw, haw! Why, he’s knowed for that dog all round the country. It’s all he cares about, is Charlie. He got into trouble for pretty near killing a man last autumn for kicking of it when his back was turned. It’s a sight to see him combing and washing of it, like a woman with her fust babby. But then it’s a’most like a humming creature in its ways, ain’t it, sir?”

It was a year before I was back again in that part of the

world. Then, one evening, I stood waiting on the little beach among the reeds and long grasses, waiting for the green boat to come over from that too attractive other shore. Presently I saw a man come down to the boat, and at the same moment one of my old friends—a mason—joined me.

“Good evening, sir.” He was carrying the same rough bag over his shoulder. Another branch of pink hawthorn was sticking out of it; and he touched his cap as if we had only parted yesterday.

“Why, that isn’t Tom? Where’s Tom?” I asked, as a strange man came down the steps and got into the boat.

“Tom? Lor’, no, sir! Ain’t you ’eard about ’im? He’s gen’ally about ’ere, too.”

Then, as the boat came creeping across, the mason told me about Tom.

“It was last autumn. His old woman had just died—not that that put him out much, but he was a bit in drink—a good bit the night it happened, they said. Anyhow, it came round the bend full steam, and ran him down—cut the boat clean in two. That’s a new ’un there. They shouted at ’im, but he was stooping down and playing with the dog—fuddled by the drink and letting his boat drift—and never ’eard ’em till they was into him.

“Well, they fished ’im out down by the island—two men from the pub did—and, so soon as the water run out of ’im and he could speak, he says, ‘Where’s my dawg?’ The dog was nowhere—that’s where the dog was. They seen him swimming round and round old Tom at first, but poor Charlie worn’t no better at water than ’is master, and he was down before they got to him. If you’ll believe me, sir, he fought like a madman for to go and drown hisself along of the poor beast. He had rheumatic fever and was clean mad—in the infirmary—after that, and, when he came out, you wouldn’t have knowed him for the same man. You dursn’t speak to him of Charlie fur your life, fur he took to liquor from the time he come out. It was from them rheumatics, you know.

And he's fair gone down now—hangs about, water-Jack—earns a tanner with the tow-line and creeps off to the pub—sleeps out o' nights——” And the mason suddenly dropped his voice to a whisper. “There he is, sure enough !”

As the new ferry-boat grounded on the pebbles, a man had risen from the slime and mud, where he had been lying, amongst the rank reeds and docks by the water's edge. A shivering, sunken-chested, drink and mud-sodden wretch, in a hat and ragged black clothes that would have dishonoured a scare-crow, with water oozing and splashing in his great sockless boots—one of those terrible hangers-on of tow-men and lock-keepers who make us shudder as they touch the varnished edges of our skiffs,—and yet, as he hobbled along to the ferry-boat, I could see that this loathsome wreck was indeed all that one year's misfortune had left of whistling and growling Tom the Ferryman.

We had to wait for two young urchins coming home from school, and, while he stood leaning on the bow of the boat, touching his hat with his trembling hand and whining for a copper whenever I looked towards him, I had time to take in all the pitiable evidence of his wretchedness.

“Yes, he ain't a beauty to look at now, is he, sir ?” said the new ferryman, when we had pushed off.

“Wait a minnit, sir,” said one of the boys—a carrotty-headed young demon of fourteen—seeing the interest I took in this local celebrity. “We'll show you somethink as good as a play in a minnit.”

The ragged water-Jack had clutched his coppers tight, and was turning round and round among the reeds, like an animal seeking his lying place, and, directly we had got out a little distance from the bank, the red-haired boy and his companion began calling—

“Chawley ! Chawley ! Where's Chawley, Tom ? Good dog ; good dog, there ;” and they leaned over the side and barked and yelped, and then pretended to encourage an imaginary dog swimming after the boat.

Directly they called, the man had sprung forward, raving and cursing and howling in a manner that was truly blood-curdling. Then he waded into the water up to his waist, and stood shaking his clenched fist after the retreating boat, his curses rattling out of a throat dry with passion.

"Go back, Tom ! Go back, my man !" his successor shouted. "He'll drown hisself one day along of you boys. Serve you right, I say, and thank you, sir, for catching him one. Now then, stop that snivel, and get up from there."

For a startling box on the ear from the uncourteous stranger he was trying to entertain had seated the red-haired schoolboy in the bottom of the boat.

"Fact is, he ain't safe to play with. If he collars one of you boys, you'll know it, I tell you that. He ain't right in his head, sir."

The wretched creature had slunk back to the shore, and was turning round in the slime and the weeds once more, waving his arms and moaning every now and again.

"No. The doctor said undoubtedly he got a crack on his head in going under the tug ; only he was that mad at the time they couldn't examine him."

"Thank you kindly, sir. I'll give it to him, little by little," said the dusty mason, as we walked away under the chestnut tree by the alehouse. "But it ain't no good, sir. He's fair gone ! And how can ye blame the poor devil for coming 'ere when he gets a copper or two ? He knows he's fairly done. He was in the House all winter, and what with the sleeping out and the drink, he'll be gone come next November. Queer thing, life, ain't it, sir ? A strong-bodied man to go to pieces like that in a few months—and all owing to a drowned dog, for it was that 'as done him. There's no doubt it was all that 'as done him !"

And I agreed with the dusty mason that life was—queer ; and that this was the quickest down-hill journey that had ever come under my observation.

THE VULGAR MAN

I

WEARFOLD CASTLE is just perfect—that is what the American tourists always say. It is a troublesome place for tourists to get at. You leave the South-Western Railway at Weardale, on the North Devon line, and trouble at once begins—with the flymen, who require ten shillings for a three-mile drive over the hill; with the coachman of the dusty waggonette, who asks half a crown a head; with the stationmaster, who throws in his weight with neighbours against visitors, and hints that those who can't afford to ride ought to walk. But when, on the other side of the hill, the driver puts on the break, pulls up his old horse, and points at it with his whip, you are forced to admit that it is worth all the trouble. If you want a castle, well, there you have it—"just perfect."

The grey old walls frowned defiance at Cromwell's pop-guns; the Roundheads never got near enough to break the painted glass in the vast windows of the baronial hall; there was music in the minstrel-gallery, and contemptuous laughter of Cavaliers drinking toasts while the buff-coats rode away baffled and beaten. There are archways and outer courts, chapel, manor-courtroom, butteries, ladies' parlours, priests' holes, and a staircase behind the hearth in all the best bedrooms. The terraced gardens have stone-flagged paths, monstrous stone parapets, and yew-trees that look as if they had been planted before America was discovered. Beneath the lowest garden of all, the brown, sunlit river comes creeping under stone bridges, and away again, twisting and

winding by marshy fields, till it works its way round to guard the castle it loves from any attack by the hill road.

It is all a castle, American tourists freely confess, but they sometimes complain that it is not kept up as it should be. By this they do not mean that they expect to hear a clatter of swords in the inner court and to see men-at-arms come bustling out of the guardroom on their approach : they mean that the white gates of the meadows would be better for some fresh paint, that there are weeds in the flower-beds, that quick eyes can observe in all directions evidence that my Lord Kilkhampton, the baronial owner, will know what to do with the sixpences paid by visitors for admittance.

Visitors, after seeing the castle, would often like to see the family, but the family are not shown.

"Say, now, your Lord Kilkhampton : does he reside here habitually ?" they ask their guide. "Twentieth baron, did you say ? That's ancient. I'd like to see this lord as a curiosity."

Now, of a wet afternoon in May, the family were expecting a visitor who was to be admitted without any charge. They were sitting in the oak parlour—my Lord Kilkhampton, my lady, and the Hon. Enid St. Mawes, their daughter and only child. That was all the family.

"D'ye think the fellow will come ?" said my lord querulously. He was a thin, grey man, most aristocratic or aspect—big nose, low forehead, narrow, clear-cut face, but his voice was weak, his gestures were vacillating ; and if the littered and untidy condition of the bureau before which he sat was symptomatic of his state of mind, my lord was a confirmed muddle pate.

"Let's hope he'll come," said Lady Kilkhampton. "Do let's make the best of things."

She was a fat, comfortable woman, and with a resigned, comfortable manner she sat knitting in her big chair by the wood fire. The castle walls were so thick that rooms were chilly even on fine May days, and really cold on wet May days.

"These vulgar men," said Lord Kilkhampton, "think no

one's time of value but their own. I believe they make appointments for the pleasure of breaking them."

Miss Enid, sitting on the window-bench and looking out through the latticed panes at the rain-swept valley, turned to ask a question :

"Did uncle Dewsbury say he was a vulgar man, or do you, papa, assume that he is—from the circumstances?"

"He said he was—in so many words." And my lord shuffled about the untidy mass of papers on his desk, to find the letter and read it again for the tenth time.

Lord Dewsbury, another grey old lord—brother of my lady—had written the letter which had roused high hopes in Wearfold Castle.

It seemed that a certain Mr. George Retford, an Australian millionaire, had recently arrived in England : and about his wealth and power Uncle Dewsbury had much to say. He was literally made of money. He was practically the owner—the controlling force, at any rate—of the famous Yellow Cliff Gold Mine in Queensland and all its subsidiary companies : The River Bend, the Old Beach, the New Beach, the Retford Mines, Lands, and Exploration Syndicate, etc., etc. On the board of one of these lesser companies Lord Dewsbury was fortunate enough to hold a seat ; and hence it had been his privilege to make the acquaintance of the great man as soon as he landed in the old country.

"One must hold a candle to the devil," said Lord Dewsbury in strict confidence to his brother-in-law, "but between you and me he is just a vulgar man—with all the usual vulgar notions. Wishes to know the dukes and that sort of thing ; wants to take a historical house and entertain. Well, then, for some reason or other, he has got it into his head that your old Wearfold is the one and only place to suit him. He came to me yesterday for a letter of introduction to you, and intends to present it on Wednesday afternoon. I feel sure, if you manage him properly, you can let to him at your own price for a year at least."

Miss Enid listened attentively while her father read the letter once again.

"Well, if he pays the rent, it doesn't matter to us whether he is vulgar or not, does it, papa? He'll hardly ask us to stay here."

Miss Enid was a handsome girl of twenty-nine or thirty. She was tall and straight, with long neck, small head, and lots of dark-brown hair, thin nose, wide nostrils, cup-shaped chin, and fine eyes of a bluish-grey: eyes that had now and then a tired look, as if she had become languid from sitting too long in the castle window and gazing across the valley for the knight who never came to carry her away.

"What's the time?" said my lord. "Half-past three! I believe the vulgar beast has thrown us over."

"Oh, why say that?" And Lady Kilkhampton smiled placidly. "Do let's make the best of things."

This was ever my lady's wish. But the plain fact was that my lord, far from carrying it into effect, had made a most consummate hash of his affairs. It had taken him thirty years to do it, but he had nearly done it now. Tresmeer House, and all that fine Cornish property, mortgaged up to the hilt and going from him soon; the house in Berkeley Square gone years ago; no money to give tall Miss Enid another London season and a chance of looking for knights in London ball-rooms; even this historic Wearfold and the Devon estate dipped: no funds to keep it up, as quick-eyed tourists could see at a glance—it was a poor look-out for the twenty-first baron. It seemed as if the unloved cousin would not succeed to much beyond the battered old coronet and the moth-eaten ermine and velvet robe.

Truly, this twentieth Lord Kilkhampton ought to have felt ashamed of himself. His task had been so easy, and yet he must needs fail. It was as though you had twenty men all in a line to pass on from hand to hand a fine old china vase. All that you asked of each was to take the vase from the last man and transfer it to the next man—nothing more; and yet

when you came to the twentieth man, he was such a dunder-head that he let the vase slip out of his clumsy fingers.

Be all that as it may, my lord's greed was now aflame as he thought of what the house agents call "a good summer let." He was bitterly in want of cash. Thirty—forty—fifty guineas a week—how much dare he ask? Fifty guineas week after week, for a personally negotiated let, with no agent's commission, would make him a more cheerful baron than he had been for a long while.

"He is coming," said Miss St. Mawes in deep, thrilling tones, from her seat in the window. "He is coming! I saw the fly cross the bridge."

"Shall we leave you alone to receive him?" asked her ladyship.

"No. Stay with me," said my lord nervously—"till we get to real business. Till then you will be of assistance. I—I might lose my temper with him."

Presently came the sound of wheels in the courtyard, then the clanging castle bell, then far-off footsteps on the marble in the hall, on polished wood in the corridor, then nearer on the carpet—at the door.

"Mr. Retford," announced the rather shabby butler, ushering the visitor into the room.

"Here's a letter of introduction." And the vulgar man presented his credentials.

"Oh, ah, yes—to be sure. My wife. My daughter."

Mr. Retford bowed, and my lord took the letter and read it:

"I have the pleasure to introduce my good friend Mr. Retford, who is desirous of making your acquaintance. Mr. Retford is a stranger in the land, but no doubt known to you by fame.—Yours, etc."

"That's for form," said Mr. Retford, "but I reckoned he'd send you the straight tip under another cover. I guess you know what I'm after."

He was a square, well-built man of forty, or perhaps less.

His dark hair was close-cropt ; his short, tawny beard was well trimmed about his firm mouth and chin ; his blue eyes were keen and resolute, but not aggressive. It was obvious that he did not know one ought not to stare thoughtfully at people as though they were tables or chairs. He stared thus at my lord, at my lady, at Miss Enid in the window ; and, without change of expression, at the panelling, the black oak cabinets, the crystal mirror, and the blue china.

"You have had a long drive," said Lady Kilkhampton graciously, as my lord seemed for a moment disconcerted by the visitor's abruptness.

"Three miles." And the visitor unceremoniously turned to his host. "Well, now—I'm a plain man. Well?"

Miss Enid, watching his face now that he had turned it, was condescending enough to think that he wronged himself. He was not ill-looking. His eyes had lit up for a moment, and he had smiled pleasantly enough before he answered mamma. It was unkind to speak of him as a vulgar man. He was self-possessed and confident, as she supposed very successful people always are ; but his voice was not harsh or common. He was not unlike a Radical member of Parliament whom she had once met at a big London dinner-party—not really a gentleman, of course, but quite presentable.

"I'm a plain man," he repeated. "You know what I want. Well, I mean business."

"You—you," said my lord, with gracious sprightliness—"you wish to take the castle?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"For ever."

"Good gracious!"

"If you are selling, I'm here to buy. It is your own, isn't it—no entail? Well, name your price."

He was vulgar. Uncle Dewsbury was quite right.

"You—you take our breath away. Eleanor, do you hear this?"

"I'll buy the whole place," continued the vulgar man, "as it stands—the whole place, with everything in it. Come, now. Name your price. I have brought my cheque-book with me. If we make a deal I'm going to give you a cheque for ten per cent. of the amount in exchange for your receipt."

"My dear sir—— Really—— Upon my word. Eleanor—Enid—do you hear this proposition?"

My lord's pale face had flushed; the hand that he ran through his grey hair was trembling. Greed and pride were at war, but pride was being hopelessly beaten.

"One moment," said Mr. Retford. "I must make my meaning quite clear. It's the whole thing I want. That's what I'm after—just as it stands: stock, lock, and barrel."

"You must give us time to discuss——"

"By all means; but discuss it now. Sit down and figure it out." And Mr. Retford pointed to the untidy bureau. "Consider I don't exist." And he walked over to the window, and turned his broad back to the room.

Miss Enid had come to her father's side. Lady Kilkhampton had also rallied to the head of the house. My lord seated himself at his desk, and muddled with his papers in much agitation, while he and the ladies of the family whispered together.

"This—this is quite"—he said presently, "quite a colonial method of doing business."

"Oh, quite," said Mr. Retford, without looking round.

"When you say everything——"

"I mean everything," said Mr. Retford.

"Pictures, furniture—everything. Quite so. But supposing that we fall in with your views, there are certain things—of sentimental interest—that we could not sell."

"What sort of things?"

Then my lord mentioned the portrait of his mother, the personal effects of the ladies, wearing apparel, and so forth.

"And the visitors' book," said Lady Kilkhampton. "And, of course, my knitting."

"That's all very well," said the vulgar man, and he turned from the window. "But when you begin like that, where are you going to stop?"

"Really, sir——" And for a moment it seemed that my lord's pride would conquer unexpectedly. "Upon my word——"

But Lady Kilkhampston calmed him by a whisper.

"Look here," said Mr. Retford. "This room, for instance. What do you want to take out of this room?"

After a pause, he was informed that my lord's private papers, my lady's work-table, and Miss St. Mawes' sketchbook and colour-box were the only things that need be removed from this particular apartment.

"Good. Then I'll say no more. Now name your price."

And at last, in a husky voice, my lord named his price. It was a very big price.

"Done," said the vulgar man. "Done with you. Now I'm ready to write you a cheque for the deposit."

Then, at a signal from my lord, the ladies understood that they should withdraw. The stage of real and most astonishing business had been reached.

"Come, dear," whispered Lady Kilkhampston; and she took her tall and stately daughter by the hand, and with her moved towards the door.

"Stop!" said the vulgar man in a loud, firm voice. "You mustn't take her out." And he pointed at tall Miss Enid. "You never mentioned her. The house would be no use to me without her."

II

TALL Miss St. Mawes had made herself seem taller and straighter than ever; two spots of pink had come to her cheeks; and her large eyes flashed fire as she looked at the vulgar man, who was still pointing at her with outstretched arm. My lord had turned crimson, and he, too, had straightened

himself. Even the natural placidity of Lady Kilkhampton was ruffled.

"Only my joke," said Mr. Retford ; and, dropping his arm, he began to laugh. "Excuse me. Just a joke—pure fun. No offence meant, Miss——"

It was pitiful to see the pride of the baron fighting with his greed.

"Fun !" he spluttered incoherently. "We are careful when we jest—in the old country. Possibly—your colonial notions—of humour——"

"Oh, a joke's a joke all the world over," pleaded Mr. Retford. "My apologies, Miss—— No offence taken, I hope." And from the breast-pocket of his blue-serge jacket he brought forth a fat cheque-book.

Without a word, or the smallest inclination of her well-carried head, Miss St. Mawes passed through the doorway with her mamma. If the young lady accepted the apology she did not say so. My lord was struggling with his troublesome pride ; but the sight of the cheque-book helped him, and soon he gulped himself into urbanity. In Brisbane it might well be that a father would have received the man's joke as a compliment, and not an affront.

"Let us get back to business," said his lordship.

The business was rapidly concluded, and the purchaser disappeared over the hill in the station fly. This wonderful thing had happened : out of the grey clouds of a dull, wet day, an incredible man had fallen ; and he had bought the castle almost without looking at it. When the vendor proposed to show him over the purchase, he said he was in a hurry, but he would come back later to go round the estate. Really, it might all have been a dream if he had not left behind him his big cheque and his little joke.

The joke kept them busy. Looked at from a distance, it now seemed quite harmless. Lady Kilkhampton was completely reconciled to it. Discussing it after dinner—at dessert,

when the shabby butler and the two very shabby footmen had gone from the room—she treated it lightly and contentedly. She praised “Mr. Moneybags,” as she called him.

“I quite took to Mr. Moneybags. He is like the north-west wind—so fresh and stirring.”

But the attitude of Miss St. Mawes towards the joke was somewhat curious. She seemed to think that, because it had been made at her expense, the joke belonged to her. Suddenly and unexpectedly she forbade her parents ever to use it again. Those pink spots had spread all over her cheeks; her eyes were once more flashing as she rose from the table; and haughtily, even angrily, she left papa and mamma to finish their strawberries alone.

“Upon my word,” said her father, “what an extraordinary girl to be upset by a little thing like that!”

“Poor Enid will not make the best of things.”

“Well, to be sure! You—you don’t think she has taken any romantic fancy into her head? Of course, if she thought there was any meaning in the joke——” And my lord smiled thoughtfully. “Eleanor! Suppose—if matters worked in that direction—could we—could one—er—lick him into shape?”

There could be no doubt, during the next few weeks, that Lord Kilkhampton also had taken to Mr. Moneybags. He talked of him all day; he dreamed of him all night. Everything was in order: my lord’s solicitors and Mr. Retford’s solicitors were pushing on with the conveyance. Lord Dewsbury wrote to offer unfeigned congratulations and to demand unstinted thanks. With a solid balance at his banker’s, Lord Kilkhampton was walking on air, and volatile gases filled his brain. Looking out of the castle windows, he laughed scornfully at tourists and their sixpences.

Would Mr. Moneybags care to rescue the Cornish property? If Mr. Retford was still buying, he should find my lord still selling. If Mr. Retford would give twice the market value for Tresmeer, all jokes should be thrown in “free gratis.” Or they could turn it into a company, pay off the mortgagees with Mr.

Retford's cash, and let my lord have the balance, half in debentures and half in ordinary shares. My lord had many schemes, and many letters passed between him and the Australian Croesus.

"I think," Mr. Retford wrote at last from his London hotel, "you can be useful to me in several ways. I can use you socially, if not in business. They tell me lords are played out in the City. Better come up for a week, and we'll talk things over, and I'll see what I can do for you."

III

MEANTIME, the great Mr. Retford in London had been busy Citywards, with Old Beach, New Beach, and all his other companies, but as yet had made no mark in the West End of the town.

Whatever were his plans for social success, Mr. Retford seemed to have postponed them. Perhaps he was waiting for Lord Kilkhampton to lead the attack on the realm of fashion; but by the second week of June he had not even bought a silk hat to attack in.

One evening, in Panama straw, blue-serge suit, and brown boots, he strolled into Hyde Park, and wandered unknown amidst the gay throng until he found a seat beneath the trees near Stanhope Gate. Here or nowhere was fashion. It was nearly seven o'clock. The Queen had just driven by towards the Marble Arch, and in all human probability would soon drive by again. Mounted policemen jogged to and fro, directing a most splendid stream of traffic; the sauntering crowd filled the paths and the grass lawns. At a little distance it seemed that the flowers had risen from their beds, and were moving—the ladies' dresses were so gaily beautiful. Close by one, almost treading on one's toes, came the pretty, simpering girls, and the gallant, simpering young men. All the world of fashion seemed to have come here to fill a vacuous hour with nothingness.

Presently Mr. Retford, without looking for one, found a friend, or rather a ship-board acquaintance. This was a Colonel Meredith, a dignified, cynical, yet kindly old fellow, who had talked to very few people on the ship. He seemed pleased to see his fellow-passenger again, and at once took a chair by his side.

"Just read a paragraph about you," said the old colonel. "Come to conquer London, I suppose. Why do you rich men do it? It is so——" He was going to say "vulgar," but he stopped himself. "So foolish to bother with society. But I suppose society represents the last thing left to conquer."

"Oh, yes. I mean to see it; to sit in the front row; to go behind the scenes; to enter the dressing-room of its principal actresses; to put my foot on a chair to show I'm at home there. And then—good-bye, society!"

"Well, there you are," said the old boy. "Look at them—wind-beaters."

"Wind-beaters?"

"Yes; beating the wind all their lives. You know the proverb: All work and no play. These neither play nor work. That's what kills."

"Not bad, that," said Mr. Retford. "I shall remember that. The wind-beaters?" And he laughed. "No; I have really come to try an experiment—to lay a dream to rest. . . . Now, I'll give you something in exchange for your wind-beaters. Every man carries a dream—workers most of all. I have carried one a long time; and I mean to be done with it—to realize the dream for what it is worth, or shake it off. I am almost sorry I came home—already: because I think—when I go—I shall leave my dream behind me."

"You'll leave your money behind you, too, if you're not careful. Every one here will ask for your money."

"If," said Mr. Retford, "while I am in England, *you* want money, pray command it."

Colonel Meredith got up from his penny chair very stiffly. He was mightily huffed.

"Good-morning to you."

It was half-past seven o'clock, but he was the sort of dignified old boy who always says "Good-morning" to social inferiors, or when huffed.

"Stop. I didn't mean for yourself, of course. I'm not an ass. For others. Any chance that comes your way of cutting the knot of a difficulty—nice young chap wanting to marry nice girl, but too poor—any case *you* think deserving—let me cut the knot. It would be a kindness."

Then the old boy unbent.

"Look here," said Mr. Retford, "I should like to see you again. I wish you'd ask me to dinner one night—when you've nothing to do. Have me to your club. I promise to behave myself, and I'd like a jaw. That would be another kindness."

The old colonel went out of the Park, tapping the pavement with his cane, and talking to himself.

"Asked me to ask him to dinner! Didn't ask me to dine with him at a restaurant—didn't promise to give me a good dinner—the best that money can buy! Deuced odd. That fellow is a gentleman—wherever he learned it."

IV

MR. RETFORD had come down to Wearfold to "view the estate." It was an extraordinary surprise visit, for which the ladies of the castle were altogether unprepared. My lord was in London, and apparently he knew nothing of Mr. Retford's journey.

"He is being very useful to me up there," said Mr. Retford to Lady Kilkhampston, "and I didn't want to disturb him. I had a free day, so I thought I'd come. London makes me restless; but don't let me put you out. . . . Thank you. I have lunched."

Lady Kilkhampston said that Mr. Godwin, the steward, should be sent for; but then Mr. Retford made an embarrassing request: Might Miss St. Mawes show him round?

"Do ask her—if it won't tire her. I should so much prefer one of the family. I only want to stroll round the place."

"What on earth are we to do?" said Miss Enid, when mamma had conveyed this request to her in another room. Miss Enid was perturbed by the request.

"Why not make the best of it," said her mamma, "and do what he asks?"

"Very well," said Miss Enid. "I will."

It was a golden, sleepy afternoon—just the time to make the best of things. The white hawthorns by the river were yellow in the afternoon light; the castle threw long shadows over the stone-walled garden; the valley was sleeping in the sunlight—the warm, still world seemed full of dreams. Miss Enid was looking quite her best in her big straw hat with the long blue ribbons, her white frock, and her high-heeled buckle-shoes. Her eyes were not tired, and there was colour in her cheeks. After all, it was better to be out and about with this masterful, if rather vulgar, man than to be sitting alone in one of the castle windows. There was excitement in it. She drew a quick breath every time that she thought of the possibility of his making another joke.

He was younger than she had at first guessed—not more than thirty-five. She saw this plainly while he held the gate for her at the home farm.

"Now, then, old Chew-the-cud, make room for the lady." And he put his hands on the hind-quarters of a ruminating cow, and pushed her off the path. Then Miss Enid saw that he was strong.

When they came to Monk's Ride meadow she saw that he was careful: because he refused to cross it.

"No; not that way. You might spoil your pretty shoes." And he smiled at her.

"Well, it is rather boggy. But how did you know that?"

"Look at the tussocks," he said, smiling, "and the emerald grass—not to speak of those little white flowers."

When they came to the one-storey cottage on the edge of the beech-wood, she saw that he was serious and kind.

"I hate to think of people living in places like that." And he frowned at the meagre cottage. "Of women especially—nasty, rheumatic little hole."

"It's the worst cottage we have—*had*," said Miss Enid apologetically. "My father would have pulled it down and built another long ago; but—but——"

"I understand," said Mr. Retford sympathetically.

They had walked for more than a mile, and he had not once been vulgar. His voice was pleasant enough. Really, this afternoon he was just like any one else—a man who had been in the Grenadiers, any one—except that he was disconcerting every now and then, dreadfully disconcerting. Suddenly he talked about himself and the flourishing town of Retford in Queensland.

"Fancy," said Enid politely, "having a town named after you!"

"No," he said; "I am named after the town."

"Really?"

"I named myself—dropped my old name when I went out there, and made a fresh start. You see, I had no relations to be proud of. I am quite a self-made man. So there's no one else to blame if I've made myself badly."

That was disconcerting. But tall Enid possessed a very nice characteristic: she had only one way of talking to people. Papa had different manners for people on various social planes; but she had only one. She could stand very straight and flash her eyes in silence; but if she talked, she must talk prettily and freely, whether to Australian miners or to British Grenadiers. Thus, though he had disconcerted her by talking of himself, she was compelled to talk of herself when he asked her to.

"Yes," she said; "I do love it all. . . . No; I'm not angry with you for taking it from us. That can't be helped. I always knew it would happen. . . . I love it because I was born here, and have lived here ever since. One learns either to love a place or to hate it—in a lifetime."

"Yes," he said; "thirty years is a longish time."

That was a horribly disconcerting thing to say, and it made Miss Enid stand up and flash in silence.

"You are quite right," she said, after a long pause, and she forced a laugh. "I am over twenty-nine. But may I ask how you happen to know that?"

"Oh, the Peerage. We common folk like reading our Peerage."

Yet, as they walked side by side on the grass drive through the beech-wood, she had forgiven him for disconcerting her. He was sympathetic and not unimaginative; and he pleased her greatly by admiring everything—the white stems of the beech-trees, the grey lichen and the green moss, the last of the primroses, and the pale wood-violets. He knew the names of all the English wild flowers, and he told her he was fond of flowers and children. It was wonderful. Mamma would not have believed her ears had she heard it. Miss Enid was prattling of her childhood to this vulgar man as though he had been an old friend—a girl friend, one might suppose. He forced her to do it by his laugh and his eyes.

When they came within sight of the ladder-stile and that prettiest of all views—the castle in the sunlight looked at from the shadow of the wood—she had told him about her horrid German governess, her pony Jack, and was prattling now of childish romance.

"There," she said gaily. "This is where I used to come riding on Jack as a girl of fifteen or sixteen." And she laughed. "But look at the view." And she pointed across the stile.

"No. Tell me some more. Do. The romance!"

"Well, then—if you must know—at that tender age I was desperately in love—or fancied I was—with—with—the son of some neighbours."

"A young lord, of course!"

Miss Enid smiled—as who should say: What else could he be?—and went on prattling gaily. "Here, once, he scared me by——"

"That's not true," said Mr. Retford sternly, and Miss Enid drew back from the hand that would have grasped her wrist. "That's not true. He scared the birds, but he never scared you. He wasn't a lord : he was a lout. You cared no more for him than for the common flowers he used to give you. You threw them away before you reached the castle—he watched you from the bushes. You were not in love with him, but he loved you passionately, as—fool that he is—he does still !"

V

TALL Miss Enid had drawn back until the stile checked her. Her face was white, and she panted as though she had been running : the man's fierce, strong voice had taken her breath away. He was not like the refreshing west wind ; he was like a rough north-east gale. In all her life no one had ever talked to her in this manner.

"There, don't mind me." And Mr. Retford began to laugh, and his sudden fierceness vanished. "Only my fun."

She almost crouched as she looked at him.

"Miss St. Mawes, don't think of what I said. Please; forget it. I am a rude fellow. I will have my joke."

Her thoughts were whirling. Was it true? Yes ; he was George Veal, the good-looking lad who had lived with his grandmother, old Mrs. Veal, in the one-storey cottage they had passed just now. First she had seen him at the church over the hill, and had heard him singing in the choir Sunday after Sunday ; then she had seen him in the lanes, trudging to the village school ; then, one day, she had seen him by the river, and very timidly he had offered her a bunch of violets, which she had deigned to accept. Then she had met him often—in this very wood—and they had made childish love together. It was wicked : that was the chief charm for her. It was better, a million times better, than sitting in the castle window. She was the princess, and he was one of her father's serfs ; and

when she rode out to seek him, the dull world changed into a sunlit story out of a story-book which the governess would not allow her to read.

It was very, very wicked to let him make love to her—even childish love. She was old enough to know better by the time that his poor rheumatic granny died, and he trudged over the hill to seek fortune in the wide world. She was wise enough then to be glad that he had gone. Henceforth, the woodland episode was only a chapter in the story-book of her own life—not to be opened, even for girl friends.

"Oh, yes, it's true enough," said Mr. Retford. "But, Miss St. Mawes, I let my secret slip—quite by accident. Veal was my name right enough. But, naturally, I don't want any one to know of my shockingly humble origin—at least in England. No one would mind out there. Miss St. Mawes, for old sake's sake keep my secret, will you? Don't tell your father, or any one."

As they walked back he spoke to her of his youth, telling her of things that she did not know—of an ill-used mother and a drunken father; of strife and pain in the narrow cottage by the wood; of hunger and cold; of death induced by want, within sight of plenty; of the old, bent woman who carried sticks from the wood when her joints were aching.

"That's the grand English tradition, isn't it?" said Mr. Retford. "I was bred and born in it. Peasants to suffer while lords feast in the castle. It is in my bones—the ancient thralldom. To this day I feel it—can hardly brace myself up before one of you. That's why I like your father. He shows me so plainly that a man *is* what he makes himself. . . . I beg your pardon. I did not mean to be rude. I'll put it another way. That's why I think I'll pull down your castle."

"Pull it down?"

"Yes; it has stood there long enough. That has been my dream—well, a part of my dream. To come home one day and raze it to the ground—free this little valley from its ugly incubus."

"You couldn't do it."

"Couldn't I?" And Mr. Retford laughed grimly. "I have done worse things than that before now. But perhaps it would be foolish. If people asked me my reason, I should be ashamed to give it."

He told her of his life in Australia. It had been a rough life and a very busy life—first as a farmer on the Darling Downs; then as a common miner in the new goldfields by the station of Retford; then in partnership with other rough men "beginning to strike it lucky;" then as a conquering, absorbing force, managing, controlling, amalgamating, until he became lord of all the golden territory and the thriving city built by the gold. "But I am not as rich as they make out," he said. "Though I'm a pretty big boss out there."

Most of all, it surprised her to learn that in his life he had found time for some reading. He quoted Tennyson.

Then he told her of his present schemes.

"Your father is going to finish my education for me. Put on the real, tip-top polish, and introduce me to society as the correct thing. I understand you only want a lord to vouch for you, especially if you are a bachelor; and I have no bush-wife hanging on to my heels."

Enid's eyes looked tired, and she climbed the steps of the garden languidly and wearily, as though the walk had been almost too much for her. On the upper terrace he once more apologized.

"That was all nonsense what I said by the stile. I don't know why I said it. Only to make you jump—just for fun. Miss St. Mawes, please forgive me. I am sorry—very sorry, if I seemed rude and vulgar. As your father says, one ought to be careful—when jesting. Good-bye!"

Lady Kilhampton wrote to her husband reporting this surprise visit, and relating Enid's kindness in personally conducting the purchaser round his purchase.

"But he upset the poor child again. She is much upset, although all I can get out of her is that he made another joke.

Really, if he makes a third joke, I don't know what we shall do with her ! ”

VI

PAPA had been set to work in London. Mr. Retford had a fine suite of rooms on the first-floor of the newest of all the hotels. He had an electric brougham to carry him about the dusty streets, and a gigantic touring motor to whisk him out into the fresh air when the dust from the wood pavements affected his throat and made him cough : he had a valet and a secretary, and he had engaged old Lord Kilkhampton to ask for and reply to all invitations. He was obdurate about Tresmeer, but he had found his lordship a director's seat on the boards of two of his companies, and, so far as social matters were concerned, he gave my lord *carte blanche*.

“ Would you believe it ? ” said society. “ The man is so ignorant he has got that old fossil to run him ! ”

Society knew all about Mr. Retford by now. The newspapers were full of his name and his fame. He had amassed his vast fortune in the quickest time on record ; he had a golden touch and a golden eye ; he and gold exhibited a sort of odd chemical affinity—when he strolled about Queensland he was like a dowser looking for water. A paying reef, workable ore hundreds of feet below the ground, would set him twitching and quivering on the surface. He had come home to buy landed property in England. He *had* bought the famous Wearfold Castle and its wide domain, etc., etc. But what set society twitching and quivering was the often-repeated statement that he was seeking a wife to put in his castle.

My lord had obtained a furnished house in Brook Street, within easy access of Mr. Retford's hotel ; and the ladies of the family had come up for the rest of the season, to share in papa's prosperity, and to watch papa at his work. It was not gratifying to the elder lady, and it was most painful to the

younger lady, to observe papa thus toiling. All of papa's pride had gone, and nothing but his greed was left. Lord Dewsbury had advised him to hold a candle to the devil, but really it seemed that he had sold himself as well as his castle to the devil.

"Look here," Mr. Retford would say: "I can't see that you are pushing me as I ought to be pushed. You won't mind my speaking frankly, will you? . . . Well, then, I'm dining to-night with Lady Bannerclere. She is a marchioness, isn't she? Well, I don't owe her to you. She introduced herself to me at the Pontypridds'; and I didn't owe the Pontypridds to you. It seems to me you are not pushing me, but I am just pushing myself half the time."

Papa, alone with his ladies in the furnished house, was insupportable after such a conversation as this.

"Is it worth going on with?" Lady Kilkhampston would ask. "Why not make the best of what you have got already, and take things easily?"

"He would deprive me of my seat on the River Bend and the Retford Houses Trust if I offended him—I dare not offend him—but my task is growing more and more irksome."

"Look here," said Mr. Retford another day to his social guide: "Are you keeping in view the most important point of all—that you are to find me a wife? You know what I want—a lady in her own right."

"I have explained to you," said Lord Kilkhampston, "that——"

"Tell me some other time," said Mr. Retford. "I can't stop now. I'm off to lunch with the Cheltenhams. By the way, I don't owe the Cheltenhams to you, do I?" And the great man bustled downstairs to his electric brougham.

As the weeks passed, my lord felt that the work was driving him out of his mind. His nerves were giving way under the strain: each time that Mr. Retford said "Look here" he suffered from a spasmodic jerk. He knew that a rebuke was coming.

"Look here. May I speak with absolute frankness? . . . Very well. I am beginning to think that you can be more use to me in the City than at this end of the town. I'll tell you what it is : I think you've dropped out. Of course you've always had the right to move in the highest society, but you haven't exercised the right. You felt above it. Just so. You like the country. You have hidden yourself so long down there in Devonshire that you've just dropped out. . . .

"You'll understand that—coming from the colonies—my respect for ancient rank led me to over-estimate, perhaps. This is just how I figured it out : You're the twentieth baron. Well, I thought you'd have at least twenty times the weight of a first baron. But look here." And he showed Lord Kilkhampston a paragraph in a halfpenny newspaper. "Read that—the party given by this Lord Bermondsey. Why, that fellow was made a baron last year. He's just a parvenu like myself, and see the company he gets about him. Read it for yourself. Two dukes, three earls, and I dare say two or three ladies in their own right ! That's what I call pushing."

Lord Kilkhampston told his wife after this conversation that her brother Dewsbury had shown luminous insight : Mr. Retford was an inherently vulgar beast.

"Is it worth going on with?" said Lady Kilkhampston again. "Never mind about the directorships. Don't be worried or fussed any more. It isn't as if you were working for the sake of Enid."

"Of course I think of my own child," said his lordship fretfully, "but the wretched snob wants higher rank. He has got some gibberish into his head about a lady in her own right. I tell him again and again that there is no peeress available ; that two of 'em are girls of five and seven, and the others are married already. But he sticks to it that he wants a lady in her own right."

"All I can say," replied Lady Kilkhampston, "is that I took to Mr. Moneybags at first, but I am getting thoroughly to dislike him. He is too upsetting. He upset Enid, and

now he has upset you ; and it upsets me to see you so upset."

VII

MISS ST. MAWES was not enjoying her London season—far from it. She was ashamed of her papa. She thought that my lord was disgracing himself, and this was a painful thought ; but another thought was more painful still : she thought that papa was involving her in his disgrace.

Society was saying : "Of course the St. Mawes girl is hunting the man. We never saw such an open chase in all our lives." She knew what society was saying, because a girl friend had told her exactly.

"Is there really nothing in it, Enid ?" asked the girl friend.

"Nothing," said Enid indignantly. "It is disgusting of people to talk about me as they do."

"Well, they see you together, and you can't blame them. But now I'll tell every one that it's all nonsense, that you make no claim on him. Shall I ?"

"Do," said Enid. "Tell them that nothing is farther from our thoughts—mine and his."

Poor Enid had a difficult part to play. It was her endeavour now to avoid Mr. Retford as much as possible ; but how could she avoid papa's patron and employer ? Every day she must see him. He came to the house in Brook Street on business—social business. He had nothing to do this afternoon, and he wished papa and the ladies to come out into the country in the motor—to Windsor, Hindhead, anywhere—and to ask some smart friends to meet them at the appointed place. He had nothing to do to-night, and he commanded papa to get up a restaurant dinner—to ask a dozen or twenty tiptop guests for him. Miss Enid, with mamma, was compelled to attend at such gatherings—nay, more, was compelled to give papa active aid in beating up the company. When she made an earnest appeal to papa for escape from this odious duty, papa was furious, almost beside himself, and mamma shed tears.

The best part of the day for poor Enid was the early morning, when a hack was brought from the livery stables in Park Lane, and she went for a ride up and down the well-watered tan. She could be alone with her thoughts here, among the bobbing straw hats and the flopping jackets, and forget Australian millionaires and all the worries of life. But here, on the tan one morning, he came jogging, to spoil her pleasure by riding with her. She bit her lips, and she gave the bay hireling a sharp heel-tap. Now, all of society that was up and about at this early hour would laugh, and say that she could not keep up with him on foot, so she was hunting him on horseback.

He looked quite respectable on a horse—just like any one else—with baggy breeches and those funny, strapped gaiters that the soldiers have taught every one to wear nowadays. His horse was quite one of the best in the Park, and he sat it easily.

"I suppose you lived on a horse out there," said Miss Enid, unwillingly making conversation.

"No; to tell the truth, I'd never been on a horse till six years ago. I learned to ride in a hurry. Do I do it all right?"

Miss Enid would not reply to this inquiry. It was the sort of thing that he always asked her when they were alone together: "How do you think I am getting on? Are my manners improving? Am I catching the correct tone—making myself more like the real gentlemen?" And so on. He talked in this manner in order to disconcert her. She was sure of it. It was the method by which insidiously he reminded her of the past. It was as though he said to her in plain words: "I am a common fellow, am I not? But I was just as common—more common—fourteen years ago. Don't forget the beech-wood and your condescension *then*."

When he was most deferential, he wounded her pride most of all. He was always apologizing for his second joke. They were never alone together but he must offer humble apologies, assure her that he had meant nothing, that he had spoken in purest colonial fun.

"Please don't speak of it again," she said very coldly. "My only wish is to forget it."

She had heard, in one of papa's outbursts, of the man's desire for the lady in her own right. When one thought of that, these apologies were peculiarly obnoxious.

"That's just my wish, too," said Mr. Retford humbly. "That's the only reason I spoke of it—to find out if you had been kind enough really to forget it. . . . Will you be riding to-morrow, at the same time?"

"No. I am not going to ride again—this week."

She thought of him always. It was impossible not to think of him. He seemed to have bought the family as well as the castle. Sitting alone in her room after this morning ride, she tried to think of the man himself, of his character. How greatly the years had changed him—from a shy, obedient peasant into a masterful ruler of men! He had been gentle and meek : now he was strong and cruel.

He was very cruel to papa. Analysing the man's conduct, remembering what he had told her, she thought she could understand his motives. He had carried from the abject little cottage an unreasoning hate of the ruling class. In his youth papa had been to him the dread lord, almost of life and death—the noble who owned all the land, all the sunlight and the shade, by whose permission the peasants laboured in the sweat of their brows for scant food, for breath, for life. All that, of course, was horrid Radical nonsense. But it was his idea. Now he had come back for a very cruel revenge : to degrade the old lord, to rattle his money and make my lord dance, pirouette unbecomingly, to study at his ease the meanness and the weakness of the man before whom he once had trembled.

Then she thought of his vulgarisms. They were a part of his plan. He was purposely vulgar. The solecisms at restaurant dinners—the things he said to make papa hang his head, to make her blush, to make the greedy collected guests wish they were dining by themselves and paying for their own dinners—were all said on purpose.

He was too clever not to learn. A man cannot learn so much and not be able to learn more. He was laughing at them—laughing at them all, extracting the same gratification from the meanness of all their little world as from the debase-ment of papa. The solecisms were carefully invented while he dressed for dinner. The same cruel idea lay behind his ambition to win a highly born wife. He would buy such a wife, and then *torture* her by telling her that she had sold her-
self. She was nearly sure that all the vulgarity was assumed; and she was quite sure after the ball at the Lerwicks', in Grosvenor Square.

She was about to dance with Major Bertie Goring, late of the Grenadiers. Major Bertie was coming to her through the crowd by the door; and Mr. Retford, who had not asked her to dance, was leaning against the wall close to her.

"Hullo, George!" said the major, genially. And he put his hand on Mr. Retford's shoulder, and then playfully dug Mr. Retford in the ribs. "You old scoundrel! What do you think you are doing here? Cutting a figure in sassiety, eh?"

"You seem," said Miss Enid to her partner, "to have made quite a friend of Mr. Retford."

"George Retford? Rather! He and I are old pals. Bought your place in Devonshire, hasn't he? He's a splendid chap, is old George."

Then Major Bertie, singing the praises of his old friend, told Miss Enid how they had first met at Boosterfontein during the war in South Africa. The major had left the brigade, and was with the yeomanry, and Mr. Retford had come out as a trooper in the Queensland contingent.

"And I call that a thundering fine thing for a millionaire to do," said genial Major Bertie.

Mr. Retford did not ask her to dance, but he asked per-
mission to take her in to supper, and she gave him permission. As soon as they were seated she spoke to him rather breath-
lessly.

"When you—you learned to ride in a hurry, it was to go

and fight in the war. I think that was fine of you. And you—you went as a common soldier.”

“I am a common fellow. What else could I go as?”

“I wish,” said Miss St. Mawes, “you wouldn’t talk like that.”

Lying awake in the daylight hours after the ball, she thought of him; and ere she slept she had made a somewhat fantastic resolve. It could not be done in crowded supper-rooms or in a family party on the big motor; but at the first convenient opportunity she would appeal to his better nature, and implore him to dismiss her papa from his employ, to cease from troubling papa and her with his cruel sport. She would appeal to the man beloved by Major Bertie. That dig in the ribs could only mean one thing: To Major Bertie the man was as worthy of regard as if the man had been in the Grenadiers with him. All the gold that formed the famous Yellow Cliff cannot buy that sort of clap on the shoulder from the British Grenadiers. Miss Enid had a high opinion of the British Grenadiers; and, just as she closed her tired eyes, she wished that Mr. Retford had really and truly been one of them, with, say, three thousand a year instead of hundreds of thousands, and that his joke by the ladder-stile had not been all pure fun.

Her opportunity came on Saturday night, at Ranelagh. It had been a blazing July day, and now it was an oppressive July night. Papa was off duty, and he had brought his ladies to dine in peace, and to forget for a few happy hours that there was any one called Retford. But on the pretty club-terrace, when the band was playing the company in to dinner, and papa was wrangling with the courteous head-waiter about a table,—there was Mr. Retford. He belonged to the best dinner-party at Ranelagh this evening. He was the guest of that very parvenu Lord Bermondsey. He passed close to Enid without seeing her. He was walking with a long, fair girl—a new beauty, who had dressed herself like a shepherdess, who had a face like a sheep’s, and whose voice was as the bleat of a sheep.

He sat next to this yellow-haired sheep at dinner, and Enid at a distance hated her.

But after dinner, on the terrace, when papa was wrangling with a polite, red-coated man about wicker chairs, Mr. Retford disengaged himself from his party, came to her, and asked her to stroll about the lawn; and she went—to make her appeal.

“I assure you I mean well, in spite of my fun,” said Mr. Retford. “I wanted to help your father; and I wanted to save his pride—his very sensitive pride—so I pretended he was useful to me. When you want to give a man a present, it’s as well to call it something else. Pretend he has earned it; or, if that’s too tall an order, pretend you think he has earned it. That’s a tip given me by a pal when I first set up as a gentleman. There’s a lot in it.”

“Oh, please don’t talk like that.”

“How shall I talk to you? May I talk to you foolishly? . . . Listen,” said Mr. Retford. “Isn’t it a rippin’ night?” And he chattered to her as though he had been some splendid, vacuous young marquess. “Listen. Strain your ears. Can you catch a false note—a flat tone? Does it ring all right?”

She was astounded. Mayfair mocked her in every word. Rotten Row rippled through each sloppy sentence.

“I learned that at night by the billy-fire in a miners’ camp—from a broken-down swell who did our cooking. I used to give him a pinch of gold dust—and a tot of whisky to keep him awake—for an hour’s lesson: to teach me the trick of it—like a parrot. He’d almost lost it himself—poor devil! . . . I took those lessons for your sake.”

“For my sake?”

“Now listen again. That’s the dust. This is the minted coin.” And he began again, and he might have been a Prime Minister. “‘I tell you plainly that you are being outstript in the race for wealth over every commercial course in Europe,’ etc. That is for the platform and the House. It is over your head, perhaps. I don’t mix my metaphors, and I don’t say ‘azackly,’ as they do in the Lords.”

"Why have you hidden it all? Why have you——"

"Why have I wanted to help your father? For your sake. Because of my gratitude to you."

"To me?"

"I owe you all my success. I am a man who has been made by a dream. I couldn't have done it without a dream. Do you understand? *You* were my dream. Not you, really, but what I thought you were. What I think you ought to have been. . . .

"I was fighting for money. It was a fight against time. You see, in my dream I had lost all sense of reality. I was to win the fight and come back, and you were to be pleased to see me. You were to tell me you had waited for me—to open a book and show me some dried flowers and say that I gave them to you." And Mr. Retford laughed. "It was a fight with time. I had each year's new Peerage and all the fashionable papers sent out to me, and my hands shook as I read them. You were twenty-three—twenty-five—twenty-seven—and I used to drop on my knees and say 'Thank God, she is free still. Thank God for that!' . . . It was a fight with time, and the confounded war wasted two years.

"Then I came home, and they told me you were poor; and I said, 'Thank God I am rich!' I was dreaming still—you understand. Then I saw you—and that was the end of my dream."

"The end of it?"

"Yes; it had served its purpose. I should not complain. You did not even recognize me—you were ashamed of me even in your memory." And Mr. Retford laughed bitterly. "But I shall be grateful to you always—for my dream. So now you may have your castle back again—if you can tell me how to give it back without hurting your father's pride. . . . Shall we join the others on the terrace?"

All that night Miss Enid wept. He was the cruellest man that she had ever heard of, in or out of a story-book. He had dreamed of her for fourteen long years; and, just when the

apotheosis of the dream was approaching, he had been cruel enough to wake.

VIII

NEXT morning she found that her appeal had been successful. Lord Kilkhampston was dismissed. His employer wrote very handsomely to thank my lord for his services, and to crave one more favour: Would my lord and the family continue to use Wearfold as their residence? It would be inconvenient for Mr. Retford to take possession, although the purchase was now completed; and he would be most grateful if my lord would act as caretaker and manager of the estate. Mr. Retford was off on a yachting cruise with Dick Brighton (the Marquess); and he feared he might be obliged to return to Queensland in the autumn.

My lord, after some consideration, granted Mr. Retford's request, and, with the ladies of his family, went down to Wearfold: to count the visitors' sixpences for the real owner; while my lady sat knitting, and Enid, in one of the castle windows, looked across the valley for some one who never came.

But he came in September, quite unexpectedly, to make business arrangements, and to bid my lord good-bye. He stayed a night at his castle; and in the afternoon next day he walked through his beech-woods with Miss Enid, and said good-bye to her.

"There," he said, and he offered her the bunch of his wild flowers that he had stooped to pick by the old ladder-stile. "For old sake's sake."

As she took the flowers she looked at him, and drew in her breath. Just then his money was nothing to her—his birth was nothing to her: he was the strong, brave knight that she had been looking for all her life.

"For old sake's sake—good-bye—Enid!"

"I—I think," she said, "you—you are rather foolish to go."

"Do you wish me to stay?"

"Yes."

She could not help saying it. His eyes made her say it. Her own thoughts made her say it. She was thinking that if he went, she would like to follow him to Queensland, to serve in the camp as his broken-down swell—to cook his billy-fire, or whatever he called it.

"How cruel you have been to me!" she said, a little later, when they stood side by side looking at that prettiest of all views—the castle in the sunlight seen from the shadow of the wood. "How cruel! What did you mean by a lady in her own right?"

"*You.*"

"But I'm not."

"Yes, my darling, you are. I'll swear you haven't inherited it from your father. I wanted a lady in her own right as a suitable mate for a gentleman in his own right—*me!*"

SOMETHING IN HIS FACE

IT was morning, it was summer, it was the grand west country of his birth, and the man went riding and thought how happy he was.

He was thirty-five : he had strength ; he had health ; he had money ; he had land. The stone house, the park, the bridges and the stream, the beechwoods and the chestnut groves, the gates and the lodges, the cottages and the white-paled gardens, were all his. The deep lanes through which his big blood horse carried him mincingly were all his. The fields were his : the white mist as it rose was his till the sunlight stole it from him. But these things were as nothing, less than nothing, when he thought of that other thing that was his. Love.

Love and life—the best of worlds at last : after waiting so long he is as happy as the birds. While his bold brown horse carried him gaily through the lanes, he thought of it. He could feel her arms about his neck, could see again the depths of love behind her smiling eyes, could hear the deep vibrating tones of love beneath the sweet girl-music of her voice. Soon he would bring her home—his wife. And he thought of all his lost chances, of the empty years. It had always been there—the happiness—if he had cared to take it. And as he thought of his happiness, it was as though scales fell from his eyes, heart, brain, and he could see, feel, understand for the first time.

He smiled as he rode along the dew-spangled track through the emerald woods. Sunlight and shadow played about him ; a squirrel clung to a white beech-stem ; birds fluttered and

sang ; and where spiders had spun their white curtains in his path, he pulled his strong horse aside and spared the spinner and its work.

"Live and let live, old boy," and he patted his horse's neck, and talked to the horse as a friend who could understand. "Master Jack, Master Jack, are you a happy horse with me? I'm not a bad sort, am I, Jack?" and he pressed with his knees and raised his hand, to make the horse step out and carry its head more proudly than ever. "You feel easier in this light snaffle than if you had half a saddler's shop in your mouth, don't you, Jack? But you want a stiff curb when hounds are running. You can take hold then, you rascal. You need some stopping *then* ; but I can stop you. You came to me with a bad character, Jack ; but I was never one to listen to tales, or bear them. You and I understand each other."

While he talked, the horse twitched its ears, arched its neck and carried him lightly, with the springy step of a deer, through the sunlight and the shadow, by the sparkling cobwebs, beneath the bright green leaves.

When he came out on the high-road, and the iron shoes rang loud and clear, he smiled in sudden wonder at the beauty of earth and sky and sea.

At his feet lay the village, nestling roofs, blue curling smoke, the grey church tower ; on his right were the low cliffs, the yellow sands, the dark blue water ; before him, far ahead, was the rising sweep of hill and moor, the big cliffs, the iron rocks, the wide bay. Far or near, on land and sea, the colour and the light were ever changing, glowing, deepening, glittering, fading, beneath the sunbeams or the moving clouds. It was wonderful to look at, wonderful to think of when one remembered that the beauty of it was no new thing. It had always been there waiting to be discovered.

Presently, as he drew near the old arch and the tumbling stream, there was a patter of rain. A cloud had come creeping up behind him to play him a trick ; and now, bursting for fun,

tried to give him a wet jacket. But he sheltered himself beneath the branches of a roadside elm, and, looking from the shadow to the far-off sunlight, laughed at the pattering rain. All the rain could do this morning would be to show him a rainbow.

"Come in here. There is room for two."

A girl, wheeling her bicycle up the hill from the village, had stopped on the other side of the road. She was sheltering herself under a mean little hawthorn.

"You'll get wet there," he said ; "and it would be a pity to spoil that pretty blue frock."

The big horse stood like a statue while the girl brought her bicycle under the great elm.

"I don't mind my frock," said the girl, smiling. "I made it myself, but I must get on soon, wet or dry—I'm late for my work."

"You ought not to work."

"Not work. Why not ?"

"Because you are too pretty for work—you ought to be employed for ornament."

"What nonsense."

"Yes, isn't it ?" and he laughed. "I didn't mean it. Work is a grand thing, and no one should be too grand to do it. But I hope you like your work."

She was tall and slim, with blue eyes, white teeth, and a freckled complexion—not really pretty, but frank and fearless and light of heart ; and while the rain lasted he talked to her freely, happily, laughingly. He had never talked so to a girl before—without hint of gallantry, without hope of favour, without lurking, prying, inquisitive thought. She was a girl—that was all. For the sake of a girl who was far away, his heart was full of kindness and comprehensive sympathy.

This blue-eyed girl was a draper's assistant, at the shop in the market-place of the old town on the other side of the moor. It was hard work, dull work, stuffy work ; but she did not mind it a bit. It seemed that they could have no secrets from

each other, though they had never met till now. She told him all her life, while the rain beat upon the leaves. Her voice mingled with the patter of the rain-drops; her laughter sounded in the splash of water tumbling over pebbles and echoing against the brickwork of the arch. She was fond of her parents, fond of her home, fond of her stupid toil—a staunch, brave, happy girl.

“Good-bye,” she said. The rain had ceased; she had wheeled her bicycle out on the wet road, and was arranging her blue skirt. “Good-bye . . . I’ll tell you a secret,” and she laughed. “I *wanted* to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Something in your face.”

The sun was shining again now. As he turned towards the village his horse squealed and pranced and tossed its head. The horse seemed as happy as happy could be.

In a deep-set lane there were school-children, with rosy faces and white pinafores, lingering, idling on their way to school, laughing and calling to one another, clambering up the banks to pick the rain-washed flowers.

“Run on, you little girls,” he called to them. “Run on, or you’ll be late for school. Why are you lingering?”

“Want to pick the flowers,” they said in chorus.

“You are flowers yourselves. And when you’re grown big enough, some one will come and pick you—How will you like that?”

The little girls laughed.

“He called us flowers . . . flowers . . . flowers.”

Their shrill, laughing, happy voices followed him.

He rode on through the village, past the silent church, by the noisy forge, by blossoming fruit trees, by roses and honeysuckle in cottage gardens—talking to people, looking, seeing, understanding, absolutely in sympathy with every one.

Through the open door of a thatched cottage, he saw so pleasant a peep of a poor man’s home that he stopped his horse

to admire. The stone floor was white and clean as china ; the wooden chairs shone from much rubbing ; there were flowers in a vase—all was brightness, neatness, humble comfort. As he looked he understood. To poor men, to rich men, the need is all one. A man may be happy in any home which is lit by love.

The red-cheeked wife came out into the doorway and dried her coarse hands in the sunlight and smiled at him. The blue peat smoke from the trimmed hearth rose high above the thatch, filled the air with its home-like odour ; and through the door there came another odour, the friendly message of good fare, sent out from the tin pot on the peat fire.

"Good morning to you," he said cheerily. "Starting your man's dinner so early ? That's a good wife."

"Thank you kindly, sir. I do my best."

"Your best is very good indeed," and he made pretence to sniff hungrily. "I can smell it. Oh, fine. I can guess what it is. Irish stew."

"That's right, sir."

"There's nothing better. I wish I was dining with you."

The good woman laughed gaily.

"You'd be very welcome, sir. You'd pay for your dinner by what you bring."

"What's that ?"

"Something in your face."

"How funny," he said, thoughtfully. "Somebody else said that."

And, as he turned away, his horse squealed and pranced and arched its back.

He rode on, rising now towards higher ground where the warm breeze blew upon his back. By cart tracks, through field gates, he was climbing the long slope of the headland and the down. Soon now he was high above the glittering sea, the white foam, and the black rocks : on his left, the small fields, pasture and plough ; beneath his horse's iron shoes, the

good galloping turf, cropt close by the sheep, kept soft by the salt wind; before him, the highest point of the long cliff-wall and the white cottage that crowns the headland point.

He could gallop now.

White sea-birds wheeled about him; the white sheep scurried and turned, broke back, with a clatter on the stony track, to let him pass; and his horse seemed mad with joy. He could scarcely stop it.

"You silly old boy. Steady, old Jack. At your age you ought to be ashamed of yourself"—he was talking to the horse while they flew over the good sound turf—"I shall call you a donkey, not a horse;" and then, when they walked again, he patted its neck lovingly. "Dear old boy—silly boy, aren't you?"

Close to the cottage on the cliff top he turned in his saddle, and looked back astonished. The sea was heavy purple; the sky was inky; a summer storm was coming fast. All was sunlight ahead, but the great cloud shadows were following him, darkening land and sea. There would be thunder and rain and a wet jacket now before he reached home. The horse, with ears laid back, seemed listening for the rumble that sounded very faintly behind them.

"There's a storm coming," he said cheerily to the old woman by the cottage.

She was very old: a bowed old crone, who stooped beneath the bundle of wood that she was carrying from the shed to the cottage.

"Yes, sir," said the old dame, and she looked up smiling. "You say rightly there." And she put down her faggots, and stood staring at him.

He laughed good-humouredly.

"Well, have a good look at me. Now you'll know me again. I often ride this way."

She passed her hand across her wrinkled forehead before she spoke.

"God bless you, sir, wherever you ride. I'd know you—yes—among a million."

"Why?"

"Something in your face," she said earnestly.

And the horse squealed, sprang round, and reared. He could scarcely force it back to the old crone, and then it stood with ears cocked, trembling.

"Why do you all say that? I wonder what it means."

"I can't tell you," said the old woman. "I could have told you once."

"A witch?"

"No;" and she laughed, and again passed her hand across her eyes. "I wasn't no witch—never. But when I was a girl they used to say there was only three things one could read plain in a man's face."

"What were they?"

"Life was one. And *Love*."

"That's two. What was the other?"

"I can't tell you. . . . I—I have forgot. . . . But," she said very earnestly, "can't either of them two account for it?"

"Yes," he said happily. "Both of them should show in my face, because I feel them in every inch of my body."

"That's right. . . . Then ride on . . . and God guard you."

Before he could answer, the horse had swung round again. It seemed mad with fear. It was flying from the summer storm.

A clap of thunder and the lightning flash. Bang, bang, went the thunder, and at every clap the horse bounded. The lightning flashed, and the man's thoughts worked:

"Horse mad with fear . . . impossible to hold it in this snaffle."

He was flying down the cart track. On his left, stone walls, white birds that wheel and dive; on his right, close to him, the mighty cliff, and, three hundred feet below, the iron rocks and the foaming sea; before him, the wire fence, and the

white gate, closed. Impossible to stop. He must have his chance at the gate—if a toss must be taken, take it there.

But as they came to the gate, the horse swerved, gave a mad plunge away towards the cliff—and, even as the horse swerved and the lightning flashed, swifter than horse or lightning, the thought passed through his mind—

“The third thing that she saw in my face was *Death*.”

And that was his last thought.

A SLOW MATCH

IT was young Mr. Mountford's first day with hounds since he had come down from Oxford. He had enjoyed a prosperous career at the House—five flying years, during which he had made friends, learnt how to dress himself, ridden in a steeplechase ; and gone within an ace of taking his degree. There can be little doubt that, if time had been no object, he would ultimately have done it. But there are more important things in life than academic honours : a man cannot afford to hang over his books for ever. So he had come down for good—to his home and his widowed mother—to rest and look about him.

He was monstrous smart in his swallow-tailed red coat, his narrow, band-like tops, and his white silk stock, bubbling beneath his chin like a well-cooked batter pudding—indescribably finer, braver, more spick and span than the ruck of the older local gentry.

“I say—I say—*Who* is that girl on the grey ?” he asked, with a roguish undergraduate smile.

“Why, Ellen Saunders of course. One can see you are a stranger, Robert.”

“The old Colonel's daughter ? Well, I am surprised.”

And he slapped his stick against his boot, and cantered onward, with the devil-may-care light-heartedness of a young swell who has a second horse out and likes to keep moving.

“Robert, I don't think you know my girl,” said Colonel Saunders, and the introduction was made.

“We have met before,” said Miss Saunders, smiling. “I wondered who you were,” and then a faint, very faint, delicate, inner rose-petal tint of a blush crept into her young face, at

the thought that she ought not to have said this—that the head-mistress of the school at Boulogne, which she had just left, would not have approved of such a free-and-easy, unreserved form of remark.

“And I wondered too,” said Mr. Mountford.

Yesterday, as he came from the station, they had met in the narrowest part of the long lane—he in his dog-cart ; she in an old-fashioned phaeton, with a funny, little, toddling white pony. Her shabby old groom had led the pony, while the cart was pulled into the hedge, and the thing had been done without scraping. She was holding the reins in both hands, pretending to steer, and she had looked up with doubt in her grey eyes, and lips apart—a swift, doubtful, shy glance of acknowledgment to a stranger’s courtesy. And the young man had taken off his hat, quick as lightning, prompt and decided, risking it, whether it might be right or wrong—an action impossible to many of the local gentlemen without a week’s debate with the ladies of their families.

And strangely, not fiercely, but pleasantly, young Mr. Mountford’s pulse had beat faster as he drove on. The soft grey eyes, the nice brown hair, the gentle lips, the firm oval of the pale face in the shadow of the big straw hat had given force to that one little glance, to flash it home—to his heart. The impression quickly faded, as he bowled along, and his mother’s woods, home farm, shrubberied drive, and then the flat stuccoed façade of his mother’s house came into view ; but, while it lasted, it was really and truly strong enough to make his heart diffidently inquire of his intellect—May I suggest something ? Can this be what people call love at first sight ?

“Your mother will be glad to have you at home,” said Miss Saunders. “It’s so lonely for her being *quite* alone. She has been awfully good to me, letting me go there whenever I like.”

Miss Saunders was motherless, and her two elder sisters were married and settled, far, far away. Naturally Mrs. Mountford would be kind to her. But what astonished the

young man was this. He knew everybody in the neighbourhood, had cousins and aunts all round for miles, had played as a child with all the young ladies of the district, still called them all by their Christian names—a local custom : the hunting-field rang with Dicks and Mauds and Jacks and Kates—and yet here had been an unknown child, unsuspected, undreamed of, under his nose. A little sprig in the familiar garden had grown up into leaf and bud ; and had never been noticed, until it burst and bloomed as the prettiest flower in all the garden.

“You see, I have been away,” she said. “At school at Eastbourne ; then in Hanover ; and for two years at Boulogne—to get *finished*. It is funny though— isn’t it ?”

“Robert,” called Colonel Saunders. “Come here. I want to talk to you.”

And, while the hounds drew the big gorse, the young man was compelled to listen to matters of local interest. Things were not quite as they should be, it seemed. To begin with : there was this revolutionary scheme for creating parish councils, or whatever they were to be called—a measure big with the possibilities of ruin and disgrace to the whole Empire. Then a lot of new people had been coming into the neighbourhood—buying and building and altering, shattering the old-world peace of the country-side. “The place is changing. It is not what it was, Robert—you’ll notice it for yourself !” Then, too, old Varden, the Hunt secretary, was breaking up fast, wouldn’t recognize the stern fact—poor old fellow—that a man can’t last for ever. “It sounds unkind, Robert, but he really *ought* to resign.” And, last of all, the conduct of the local Board of Guardians was becoming a positive scandal. One or two tradesmen from the town had got the upper hand and carried everything before them—hectoring and bullying and over-riding the feeble old country gentlemen. “We want new blood, Robert—new blood.”

To Robert, fresh from Oxford, with the breeze of the wide world still in his lungs, these local matters seemed of infinitely small importance ; but he listened politely, twisting and turning

in his saddle, praying that they would find, or that something would give him a chance of getting back to Miss Saunders.

"You know, I can't ride a bit," she said, later on, when the chance came. "But I am improving—I never had any practice till my sisters married."

She had a good square seat upon her horse; those small hands *must* be light; and he told her that all the rest would come—in time.

And so they rode together that day, and all the world—all the little local world—either observed, or heard tell of it.

"*That's a match,*" said Lady Grouseley, sitting in her barouche with her chicks and their governess, watching the hounds draw the gorse, before going home to early dinner—"Mark my words," said her ladyship decisively, to Mademoiselle Todhunter. "*That's a match!*"

"Something in the wind over there, eh?" said Mr. Chough, the worthy Master. "Well—why not? As handsome a young couple as you'd see in a long day's journey."

But the years, the heavy, silently revolving years, rolled over them, smoothing, dulling and obliterating; and the rustic moss, the smothering local lichen, was deposited upon them both, covering sharp outlines, blurring salient features, softening them down to the colour and the tone of the barks of the local trees, the surface of the local soil, until, from two bright butterflies flashing in the sunlight and the air, they were but as indistinguishable drab-hued grubs in the drab-hued earth.

Where does the moss come from? It is in the slow, sea-warmed breeze creeping across the drowsy pastures all through the long summer days; it is washed down in the autumn rains; it is in the frost which stops the hunting and in the thaw which sets it going again. It is in all places—out of the way of the noise of cities, the throb and ache of brain effort, the sting of well-earned failure, the poisoned food of undeserved success—where the stone sticks fast in the mud and cannot roll.

It is always settling, growing, binding, burying ; and you may know for a certainty that it is upon you, when you begin to find the local paper better reading than *The Times*, to discover more sense in the local magistrates' decisions than in the rulings of the Lords, to think that old clothes not only *are* as good, but look as good, as new clothes, to believe that your run of the season was quicker, longer, and a more severe test of men and horses, than anything seen in the midlands that year, to be able to name the winners in your point-to-point races from their inauguration, and to have to inquire who won the last Grand National.

Mr. Mountford had ridden with Miss Saunders for two years.

This riding out with hounds was a recognized local custom—and, like the walking out of the servants, it was supposed to lead sooner or later to matrimony. You rode by the side of the young lady nearly all the time that hounds were drawing. Everybody understood ; nobody attempted to interfere with you. Directly hounds began to run—at the sound of a holloa, a blast on the horn—you left her, and, during the chase, paid her no further attention. You would, of course, warn her not to jump into wire, and refrain from letting heavy swing-gates fall back upon and break her legs. But to have done more than that would have been to provoke unfavourable comment.

You rode out with her for one, two, or may be three seasons, and then cards were sent, the bellringers were engaged, the cake was cut ; and, on the last day of the honeymoon, if you were a man of strong character, you said, quietly but firmly—“My dear, to-morrow our new life begins in our new home. Married life has its duties, its pleasures—each for each. The nursery is the nursery, and the stable is the stable.—I think it only right to tell you, at once, that in my new harness-room I do not intend to hang any side-saddles.”

Such was the local custom.

"I am going to screw up my courage and ask you something," said Mr. Mountford, after two years. "Something I have thought about a great deal."

They were all alone, jogging home after a long day.

"I think you may ask it," said Miss Saunders, in a low voice.

"Then, is it always to be Mister Mountford and *Miss* Saunders? Don't you think it might as well be—Ellen and Robert? Mightn't we just as well call each other by our Christian names? Everybody else does."

"Why not?" said the girl, in a very low voice.

Perhaps she had fancied he was about to ask some other sort of question. She was stooping down, as though examining her horse's girths, and he could not see her face in the dusk.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. "Oh, I see. He has got a lump of clay stuck fast to his belly. I'll knock it off. There!—Ellen!"

So, henceforth, as they grew older, hunting together from September to April, they were Robert and Ellen.

The colonel hardly ever came out now, having become lazy in his old age—shirking the trouble of pulling on his boots and preferring a comfortable seat on the Bench to a long ride to cover and a cold morning in the rain—but he always sent out a groom with his daughter. Local opinion demanded this and was satisfied, though the old fellow was so poorly mounted that he made no pretence of following his mistress, but, keenly enjoying the sport on his own account, was soon a well-known and respected leader of the skirthers.

With much practice, and as years passed, she came to be a sound and resolute horsewoman, keeping to hounds certainly as well as—many people said better than—young Mr. Mountford, whose weight was steadily increasing.

"Robert taught me to ride," she always said. "Nobody else."

And, indeed, he had taken trouble with her, giving her hints and helping her as opportunity offered.

"Miss Saunders, if I may make bold to advise—Don't flick your horse on the neck when you're riding at a fence. If you want to rouse him, land him one fair on the hind quarters. Use your whip *behind* the saddle."

That was in the early ceremonious days, but she always remembered.

"Now then, Ellen—wake him up. I never saw such an old slug. Let me get behind him," or "Between you and I, Ellen, I believe you'll never do anything with that mare of yours, till you sit straighter. You've got into a nasty trick of screwing round as you land. I've been talking to Pender and he says there's a lump on her back as big as an egg," etc., etc.

This was later, when use had worn away the gloss of gallantry.

"He has certainly spoilt her chances," said Lady Grouseley, at a Christmas dance in the Town Hall. "She ought to have made a good match—but I never saw a girl go off quicker than she has."

And she critically examined Mr. Mountford's partner, turning in the mazes of the dance.

The full oval was certainly not so perfect in shape; the ivory whiteness had been spoilt by the weather; her neck was getting hollow in places, and it and her ears had tints of mellow brickwork in them; her eyes had lost their softness in the steady scrutiny of doubtful places, and the far-off peerings across wintry fields when hounds had been lost.

"I begin to think he is a good-for-nothing young man—idling at home with his fool of a mother. Why doesn't he go away and give the girl a chance."

"Sir—here—I say, sir."

It was Gould—his mother's old coachman, faithful retainer, stud-groom, trusted adviser, and privileged friend—calling to him from the saddle-room door.

"When am I to have them white gloves you was so full of last October? Same as you wanted me to drive the missis

with. Never thought any more about 'em from that day to this, I suppose?"

"No, no—I haven't forgotten, Gould, but I never seem to have had time to write and order them."

"And there's another thing," said Gould. "Are you going to put that chap Purvis into livery, or are you not? In one way, it would be a convenience—to have him to ride on the box by me when Chivers don't want to spare the footman. In another way, there's the cost of his boots and his breeches—and his coat. Is it worth it? That's for you to decide."

"Well, I have thought of that too," said Mr. Mountford. "But I don't know. Perhaps we had better go on as we are."

"May be!" said Gould. "But I hope you're not going to let yourself drift into one of the never-do-nothing sort," he added severely. "Better make a mistake now and then than sit still. Look before you leap! Yes—but don't go round to look or you'll never leap at all."

This was the wise *obiter dictum* of Gould; yet, in truth, he, too, had become lamentably moss-grown. But he loved his young master, and his eye was quick to grasp the peril which he for himself ignored.

There was no time to do anything. The weeks, the months, the years, seemed to fly round on their heavy, silently gliding wheel. He had, at one period, meant to do so much—to set his mother's affairs in order, place their mode of life on a better system, introduce modern reforms into domestic routine—to save and to make money; and he had done nothing—nothing at all, except cut down the yew hedge and let more light and air into the stable yard.

It was characteristic of the local gentry that their work was of this negative and non-creative form.

"Come round on Sunday and I'll show you what I have done. I think you'll say it's an improvement."

The Sabbath visitor would look about him and see nothing new.

"What? Don't you remember that old lean-to against the

end of the house? Well, I have pulled it down. Wonderful improvement, I think. I always wanted to do it in my poor father's time."

In their rare fits of energy, they laid the axe to trees, grubbed up shrubs, pulled down and cleared away out-buildings, etc., sometimes even corners off their houses, but they planted, built, added—never.

The years slipped by.

He always thought he had owned a horse for two seasons, when he had ridden him four or five. Sitting on the harness-room table, chatting confidentially with Gould, he would pause, pipe in hand, startled by the lapse of time.

"No, sir, you may say what you like, but *I* know it's nine years."

"Can't be, Gould. Can't be."

"Look here. You and me went to Rugby together to buy her."

"Yes."

"That night, we was in London, and we went to the Westminster Aquarium after dinner, and we see that Lucy Bates, as had had the trouble—dressed up to the nines. Now she left here nine year ago, and I *know*, because her father was in here, the other day, and he was counting it up. Nine year ago."

"Poor girl! Well. Well."

"You know *you* was suspected over Lucy at first."

"Never!"

"You was. But *I* knew it wasn't you. 'Not *he*,' I said."

Delivered in the tone which Gould unconsciously adopted, it was a doubtful compliment.

To young Mr. Mountford, weltering in his bed of sunny mornings, ere the cubbing had begun, great thoughts would come thronging.

One day he would rouse himself and begin life in earnest. There was plenty of time, but, sooner or later, he would carve out a career. The dreaded Parish Councils had been in

existence for years. One day he would stand as a candidate, possibly run for the Board of Guardians as well, offer himself to the Hunt Committee as a successor to old Varden, look about him and get married.

Would she have him? Dear girl! It would be only natural for her to yield, if he made a bold attack. And where could he find a sweeter, kinder wife? Time enough for all that, though.

And his sleep-drowned mind floated away on the drowsy sunbeams to old days at Oxford—days obscured rather than lit up by love's smoky torch—and it seemed to him, that, through the haze of time, he saw a terrible lady-killer, a very devil of a fellow. Yes. Tea with the barmaid at Bullendon, and a water picnic with the ladies from the Frivolity!

Ah well, in the press and rush of his healthy, hard-riding, bustling, country life, Cupid had been crowded out. And a good job too!

One morning, Mr. Mountford, coming out of a field over a ragged blackthorn hedge with bits of timber in the weak places, stood upon his head in a lane, and then subsided on the gravel with a broken collar bone. There was no doubt—he was not the same man across a country as the Christ Church jockey. He rode at his fences so sluggishly of late.

There was a paragraph in the local paper, entitled, "Alarming accident in the hunting field," which he learned by heart, while, propped up on pillows, he lay in bed and sullied the white sheets with the ashes from his pipe.

"I have brought somebody to see you," said his mother, tapping at the door of the sick-room. "A kind friend who offers to read to my poor injured boy. May we come in?"

Miss Saunders seated herself by the bed, with the demure self-composure of a professional sick-nurse. The invalid stretched a hand from beneath the mountain of clothes and pressed one of hers. Then the mother left them, and the girl began to read.

"Do you like what I am reading?" she asked presently.

He had been moving restlessly and was breathing hard—almost groaning.

"Too exciting," he confessed. "I think something I know would do me more good. Give me a taste of old *Handley Cross*. You'll find the book over there on the drawers."

Then his breathing grew regular and easy, and very soon he was sleeping like an infant; but she continued to read for some little time, to soothe his slumbers.

His mother softly opened the door, and found the visitor stooping over the sleeping form. Miss Saunders' face was flushed, as she laid her finger on her lip in a warning manner, and on tip-toe stole out into the corridor.

There was a perceptible change—or rather development—in the young lady's manner after the alarming incident and sick-room visits. Something motherly, protecting, had crept into her treatment of the young man which was new.

When he returned to the field, she was full of entreaties that he would, at any rate at first, ride with caution. She was quick to lead him out of difficulties, and always contrived to forge ahead when anything awkward presented itself.

After a scamper and a fox marked to ground, one day, she suddenly observed the perspiration rolling off his ample forehead.

"Robert! How dreadfully hot you are!" she cried in the motherly tone of solicitude and distress.

He took off his old-fashioned silk hat, and, while they rode side by side through the wood, she wiped his brow with her little silk handkerchief. There were very few people about.

Her lip was trembling, and she asked him searching questions about his health, imploring him to keep nothing back, to tell her every little symptom, no matter how insignificant it might appear to his strong masculine mind. And as they rode slowly, after the drawing hounds, beneath the fir trees, he told her everything—as to a famous consulting physician and old family friend.

He was alarmed about himself, but ashamed of his vague fears. After his illness, as he called it, he had shied away from his weighing-machine in horror. While he lay in bed, his weight had gone up so *frightfully*. Then too, he had queer sensations in the head—not to be called headaches exactly—but feelings. And what troubled him most was loss of appetite. He did not really relish his food—hardly cared what he ate.

In sober truth these were the delusions of convalescence. The poor fellow played an excellent knife and fork, and puzzled his mother when he looked up from an empty plate, with the face of a frightened child, crying that he could eat no more.

But the girl was alarmed ; lay awake half the night reading books and thinking ; and next day went over and communicated her alarm to the mother.

"It is probably liver ; but something ought to be done."

"He won't take medicine," said the mother, trembling.

"I know, I know. My father is just the same. Men are so reckless."

"I daren't call in the doctor again—because that would alarm him. He is so easily alarmed about himself, and Doctor Banks says that his mere presence appears to upset him."

After a long discussion by the drawing-room fire, Gould was summoned.

"My dear, dear girl, what should I do without you ? You are so strong, so firm, so good."

"But how should one give it him, Gould ?" asked Miss Saunders.

"Mix it in his food, miss. Same as I do for the dogs."

"But he would notice it."

"Not he, miss. I'll tell Chivers exactly how to wrop it in. Best give it him in a pudden."

And so the debate continued.

"Gould !" called Miss Saunders, her nerve perhaps failing her as the man put his hand on the drawing-room door.

"Gould ! Not so much as you would give a dog."

"*More!*" said Gould, authoritatively. "It stands to reason, miss. He's a big, heavy man. More than a dog. *I know.*"

That night at dinner, there was an early rhubarb tart, with which were served two glasses of liquid custard. Chivers, the butler, assisted his mistress to one with his own hand. The young master took the other; poured it over his tart, and scooped the last drop off an empty plate in silence.

And thus, watched over, jealously guarded, thought for, mildly physicked now and then, unconsciously moving in an atmosphere languorous with feminine solicitude, young Mr. Mountford rode onward, down the grooves of time.

Until one winter's day, when dusk was falling, horses were blown and steaming, and hounds were ding-donging the bell-notes of their blood chorus after a rapidly sinking fox.

"Robert, let *me* go. My horse is freshest," said Miss Saunders—and she sat down; used her stick behind the saddle; and resolutely drove her flagging beast at the bank.

It was a rotten bank, with wattles on top—a marshy take-off and a black morass to land in. The horse pegged his toes into the loose earth; carried the wattles with him; came down on the other side; rolled on his rider; got up, with his feet through his reins; dragged her a few yards; then fell again and lay still, with the last puff of wind out of his body.

"Ellen!" screamed the young man, abandoning his horse and clambering through the breach. "Ellen! Speak to me!" and he was down in the dirt supporting her.

It was near the road. By a miraculous chance, Pender, the old groom, was at hand to gallop away and fetch a fly from the inn.

She was really not hurt at all, ugly as the thing had looked, but she was woefully dirty—smothered from head to foot in black ooze and slime.

Holding her in his arms, as the brougham jolted and shook, he tried to clean her as much as possible—wiping her pale face and forehead with his big bandanna handkerchief. With tender

care, lest there might be cuts beneath the mud, he wiped her cold cheek and trembling lips—and then he *kissed* them.

“My darling. I was so frightened,” he stammered.

He had never once *kissed* her, in all those years ; and now a slow strange fire began to creep through his sluggish veins ; his heart began to beat, his pulse to throb, and, as the brougham jogged homeward, the fire raged. Like a thunderbolt, it had come at last : love, the devouring flame.

And she too, no longer guarding his coat from her miry bodice, responded to his caresses—yielding to the bold attack.

THE LOCK-KEEPER

THE July sun was declining. In another hour or so the belt of poplars and elms on the island would screen the Lock from its vertical rays; the summer twilight would begin to fall, and the cool breath of the summer night would creep along the burning river and the parched fields on its banks. But in these last hours of the midsummer day the heat seemed at its intensest point. The concrete and brick of the lock walls gave off the heat they had been absorbing all day, and the iron on the beams of the lumbering gates almost scorched the hand that touched it.

A steam-tug had just come through the gates, slipping its chain of timber barges in the narrow cut above, and was panting and throbbing with a persistent and irritating murmur. Jarvis, the lock-keeper, had shut the gates and was crossing the foot-bridge to turn his windlass, when the engineer hailed him.

"Where's the pretty mistress, mate?" he called, nodding his head towards the open door of the Lock-house.

"Not 'ome yet," said the lockman with a discontented grunt. "What d'ye want with her?"

"I got her some o' them flowers she spoke of," said the man.

He was sun-burnt, oily, and sooty—a great black-bearded man, with good-natured blue eyes which shone out strangely bright in his dirty, weather-stained face. He stooped down towards the stokehole, and, from some receptacle among the coals and dirt, fished out a big bunch of water-lilies and held them up in his grimy hand.

"For *her*?" asked the lockman.

"If *you* please."

"I thank you kindly, mate, for thinking on her. She'll be here to thank you herself when you come up to-morrow morning."

And, while the water was hissing and gurgling out below, the lockman carried the floral offering across to his cottage, and laid it down on the rough deal table in the empty living-room.

It was another hour before the lower gates were opened for the last of the barges, and the lock-keeper was free to pause from his labours. Pulling a blackened clay from the pocket of his canvas coat, which was lying by the windlass, he lighted its half-smoked contents, seated himself on the beam of the gate, and looked up-stream as he puffed at his pipe. There were no more boats coming down. A punt, beneath the shadow of some willows, was the only craft in sight. The dusty track of the tow-path was empty, save for some ragged urchins who were playing among the sedge grass and reeds on its brink a couple of hundred yards away. Fields of yellow corn ran down to the red-brick Lock-house and skirted the tow-path, only separated from it by a dry, weed-choked ditch; and behind these flat meadows a range of wooded hills rose suddenly. There was a rough bridge of planks from the corn-field to the tow-path, where a cartway led through the standing corn to the high-road half a mile away, and it was to this bridge that the man's eyes returned again and again.

He was a rough sort of fellow, this lockman—a heavy-built man of forty; but his weather-beaten features made him look older. His swarthy face, bushy eyebrows, and the bristling red hair that covered his chin and throat gave him rather a ferocious appearance; his coarse straw hat shaded eyes that always seemed to glitter angrily; his grey flannel shirt was open at the neck, showing a sun-burnt chest hairy as a beast's.

Presently he clenched his fist, and, with a half-uttered curse, brought it down on the woodwork by his side. He had grown too angry to smoke, so he put away his pipe in a deep

pocket of his corduroy trousers, and began to pace the little bridge.

This was the third time within a week that his young wife had kept him waiting for his tea. This was the third time that he had been made to watch the gap in the fields for the slight girlish figure with the pretty face and dark curling hair that he was watching for now.

About two years ago he had made up his mind that he wanted somebody to look after the cottage, give him his meals in comfort, and save him the trouble of making his own bed and, at rare intervals, sweeping out the kitchen. Chance had thrown this girl in his way—the daughter of another lock-keeper further up stream, who had tumbled into his lock after a carouse one dark night and been drowned—and he had married the young waif. Brought up in a lock-house, she was eminently suited to fill the vacancy. He was doing a generous action and—he had fallen in love with the girl's pretty face from the first moment he saw it.

She went into the neighbouring town every day to work at a dressmaker's, for she was clever with her fingers, and her small earnings were a welcome addition to the household fund; but if she could not be there to give her lord and master his morning and evening meal, the thing must be put a stop to. He had waited on himself long enough, he thought angrily, and if his wife was trying to leave him to get on by himself again, he would pretty soon show her why he had married her and what his notion of wifely duty was.

"Good-night," he growled, as his assistant announced his departure for the night and left him in undisputed possession of the lock till half-past five to-morrow morning, when the barges would begin to come up again.

Three row-boats came down, one after the other, at longish intervals; and, after running each of these over the rollers and launching it on the lower water, the lockman returned to his station on the gate and sat nursing his wrath and watching the gap in the yellow corn.

What was she doing all this time? She had been late before, but never anything like this. While he was being deprived of the meal that he had earned so well by the long laborious day in the burning sun, she was idling about the town, probably with some slut of a work-girl, looking at the shop windows, or matching a ribbon for her Sunday hat. This going into the town must certainly be stopped at once and for ever. She loved the town and hated leaving it, or why should she loiter so on her way back? If he told her she could stay there for good and never see the Lock-house again, she would be as pleased as a child who had been granted an unexpected holiday. That was why she had been so anxious to find work, and worried him till he was fool enough to let her have her own way. If it was only work she wanted, she could have found plenty of that at home. She could have dug and delved in the little strip of garden, trained roses and creepers over the cottage, grown the flowers she pretended to be so fond of, and made his house the admiration of bargees and boating-folk for miles up and down the river, as other lock-keepers' wives had done for their husbands. If it was the money she wanted, she could have sold gingerbeer and fruit to people as they passed through: there would have been no objection to that. Yes, there would though: she was too young and too pretty for that. It would only have led to rows!

Thus thought the angry lockman. Then he thought of the row the other day, when the man on the electric launch had given her the flower out of his button-hole and waved his hat to her as the boat moved onwards up the stream. It was a sickly white flower, a hothouse bloom that made the whole house stink, and he had snatched it out of her hand while she sat grinning over it, and smashed it and pitched it out of the window. She was as mad about it as a wild cat, and sat moaning all the evening after. . . . After? Well, perhaps he had been rough with her; but, powers above, what had she expected when she married him? Never mind, he had

got some flowers for her now—a present from a friend, not a grinning monkey whose neck he would have wrung if he had been within reach.

This reminded him of the water-lilies. He found them where he had left them, on the bare deal table. The delicate white cups were closed already, and leaves and flowers were alike shrivelling and dying for want of water. They had faded more since he had them than during all the time in the heated stokehole. He put them in an earthenware jar full of water, on the mantelpiece. The fire had gone out in the ash-strewn grate, and he stooped down in the hope of raking the last embers together and fanning them to a flame. It was no good ; he threw down the bent and rusty poker, and pulled out his silver watch by the brass chain that held it in his shirt. It was half-past seven o'clock. She ought to have been home two hours ago. The oath that he was framing was suddenly checked by a thought that made him draw his breath shortly—was anything wrong ? Had anything happened to her ? She had no more sense than a child—had she come to some harm ? Been run over by a cart or something, when she was staring over her shoulders at those cursed shop windows, instead of looking where she was going ? Or had she tumbled out of one of the windows of the great warehouse where she worked ? He was cold all over his rough frame, and his limbs seemed to shiver beneath him as he thought of these and other horrible accidents that might have happened. Bah ! his stomach was giving signals that it was not to be trifled with longer. What a fool he was ! When he got outside, ten to one he would see her hurrying along the tow-path towards him, and then he would be as angry with her as ever.

He came out of the cottage slowly, compelled himself to look down the river first, then turned and looked up, and the towing-path was empty as before—not a soul in sight : even the urchins had disappeared. No, it was no good pretending ; come when she might, with a good excuse or none at all, he would not be angry now. The torment of waiting had worn

him out ; for to-night, at least, the woman need not fear his rough tongue or his heavy hand.

Why had not he thought of sending Bill, his mate, to look for her before letting him go for the night ? He could not leave his post and go and fetch her home himself ; but there were no boats about, he could go up the road and look for her down the cart-track in the field, and yet be within call if wanted.

"Lock ho ! lock ahoy !" came a voice from the lock presently, and he ran back along the tow-path to his neglected duty.

It was an empty dredging barge with two men and a wretched slave of a horse. He clung to the companionship of these two men, old acquaintances, letting them through as slowly as possible to kill time. One of them wanted to know where the missis was, and he told him.

"I'd knock 'er 'ead off her shoulders if mine did it," the man volunteered, and the lock-keeper declared he thought the remedy an excellent one. "Good-night ! hold up, horse !" and the exhausted beast went shambling and staggering on.

Directly the crack of the whip and the whistling of the men had grown faint in the distance, he looked at his watch once more. He had got rid of half an hour, and it was ten minutes past eight. The shadow of the belt of trees had come right over the lock ; the distant hills were bathed in the light of the setting sun ; a haze of gnats was dancing on the bright patches of the stream ; great moths were fluttering and wheeling over the reeds, and the bats had come out and were flitting and dipping round the empty cottage : it would be dark directly.

The man was frightened now—frightened for the first time in his life, perhaps. Something *must* have happened. She had no relatives who could have detained her, and she would never have dared to stay out with some friend of the workroom, and thus brave her husband's certain wrath. He must go to look for her and learn the worst—over there, in the noisy town. There was no room for thoughts of leaving the lock unguarded

now, or of getting a substitute from the public-house lower down the road. In his fixed and overwhelming fear all other things were lost.

He had reached the plank-bridge, and was already out of breath (he had run so fast), when he saw a woman coming towards him. In the deepening twilight, he thought it was his wife, for an instant—and in that instant was near fainting from the rush of intense relief—but it was not his wife. It was a girl of about her age, who stopped when she met him.

“Mr. Jarvis, please?” and she put a letter into his hand, and hurried off, back towards the town.

The direction was in his wife’s handwriting—the writing of an ignorant person who has imperfectly learnt to write late in life. He tore open the envelope, and grasped the import of its contents—though no shadow in his vague fears had prepared him for them—with surprising quickness. It was all told in the first scrawling sentence: “I have left you for good with one as will treat me better than you have treat me; he says I shall never come back——”

“Stop, you! Stop!” and the girl, who was nearly across the field, stopped, looked round, and hurried on. “Stop, damn you; stop!” roared the man’s harsh voice, and he started in pursuit.

She ran, but he caught her at the gate into the road, and gripped her arm in his fierce grasp. Not a soul was in sight; she thought he was going to strike her, and cowered down against the bars of the gate, too terrified to scream.

“You knew all of this. . . . You lie, you ——. You know she has gone. You knew she was a-going. She says she will never come back. If you see her, or write to her, tell her from me she never said wiser word. Let her keep to that word, come what may, for if she does come back, so help me God, she comes to her death.”

He let her go then, turned on his heel, and slowly walked back through the standing corn towards the empty lock-house.

It was the burning summer-time once more : the height of the boating season. There were two extra men working under Jarvis and his regular assistants ; and, almost since daybreak, the lock had been full. On this Sunday between two of the great up-river fixtures, there is always an unceasing stream of traffic. All the floating stock of the boat-letters is being transported ; some of it by road, but most of it by water. Launches and house-boats, with their tenders and provision-barges, are coming down to take up positions on to-morrow's scene of action, together with an unending procession of holiday-makers in lighter craft. There is also the usual contingent of Sunday boaters, who are out for a happy day, who know nothing of the aquatic festivals for which so many are making, and who, in the earlier part of the day, are all struggling up-stream.

At the locks, where the upward and downward processions meet, blocks occur, and there is considerable confusion and delay. Indeed, there is something of a battle waged, and the ordinary rules of etiquette that govern the river are temporarily suspended. When a houseboat or steam-tug says, "By your leave," it is necessary to give way, if you happen to be sitting in a highly-varnished and gilded gig, lest, while arguing the point, and claiming the right of precedence, your mahogany should be crushed like a nut against the slimy brick wall of the channel. But there are always lighter neighbours on whom we can practise the methods of our heavy and irresistible enemy. Thus, amidst a chorus of "Thank you's," and "If-you-pleases," cries of "Look out," "Where the deuce are you coming to, sir ?" and a cracking and grating of wood and brass, as the teak and mahogany sides of the assembled vessels grind together, which, at a little distance, sounds not unlike the croaking of frogs in a marsh, might rather than right gains first place, and misused strength gets through the gates sometimes an hour in advance of unchampioned weakness.

This battle is rather amusing than otherwise to watch from

the lock or tow-path, and there is always a crowd of spectators—gaily-dressed ladies who have been landed to escape the fray, those who have already got through and have returned to watch the fun, and loiterers of low and high degree who come to smoke their cigars and pipes at the busy lock as a regular Sunday recreation. In the midst of this noise and racket, the squabblings and laughter, the red-haired lockman laboured at the heavy gates and windlass without cessation. There were pickings, in the way of tips for favouritism, to be made over there by the rattling and jolting rollers, but Jarvis left such spoil to his mate and one of the hirelings. All the boating fraternity who knew Mr. Jarvis knew him for a surly beast, who did his duty, certainly, but in the most offensive way possible; who, unlike other lock-keepers, had no conversation; who, if roused to speech on the question of probable rain or sunshine, would declare in all likelihood that he was there as lock-keeper, not as clerk of the weather; who never said "Sir," or "Miss;" and who, if you gave him a shilling for himself, only made a grunt, which *might* be meant for "thank you," or might be meant for anything else.

This had always been Jarvis's character. And in the last twelve months, in which he had been cooking his own tea, making his own bed, and sweeping out the cottage at longer and longer intervals, his manners had certainly not improved. Complaints had been made of his sad lack of polish a good many times, but, since the man did his work excellently, never had an accident, had never been reported as drunk and incapable, and required less assistance or holiday than any other lockman on the river, his employers considered that there was no case for a quarrel with him. They paid him to do the work of the lock, not to make the place a pleasant resort by the charm of his personality, they argued, and as long as he fulfilled his side of the bargain they would leave him in peace.

The idlers about the lock gave Mr. Jarvis a wide berth as he toiled with the heavy beam of the gates, and were careful not to impede his great bare arm as it swung round on the iron

windlass. Had he been any other lockman, some of them would have talked with him of his long hours and his hard labour : they would have given him bits of tobacco from their pouches, and sixpences to get beer when his toil was over ; they would have lent him a hand now and then with the windlass, and brought the weight of their backs to bear on the beam ; but, being Jarvis, he was left alone by all—without sympathy or sixpences. A few of the rough customers—professionals in charge of hired flotillas, and the coaly conductors of the towing-launches—knew him well, were acquainted with his private history, and could make allowances ; and these hailed him, and even grasped his horny hand as they passed.

It was late in the afternoon, when the island was alive with tea-makers, and the chink of china was heard above the hum of voices in the shadow of the belt of willows, when the upward traffic had long ceased, while there still seemed no end to the downward procession, that Jarvis gave the assembled idlers the most signal example of the man's horribly bad manners and invincible ruffianism they had ever seen.

A large steam-launch, decked with flowers and covered with a yellow awning, bearing a cargo of very noisy revellers, was just passing out. The launch had interested spectators. Beneath that stretching awning were loud-voiced men, laughing and drinking and smoking, chaffing the people on the bank, and making merry at everybody's expense ; amongst the men were many-coloured dresses and bright feminine faces, not guiltless of rouge and powder, whose owners had joined in the merriment. It was evident, to the least versed in river life, that the gentlemen were not really gentlemen, and that the ladies were not ladies. But one comes to the lock on Sundays to see life—of every variety and every grade in the social scale—so one must not turn away one's head when boat-loads like this are going through. They are, indeed, a large factor in the fun that is to be expected.

As the steam-whistle shrieked, and the boat slowly advanced, a girl under a red parasol gave a man on board something screwed

up in paper, and the man leaned over and put the small parcel into the lock-keeper's hand.

"For me?" said the lock-keeper, with his well-known grunt.

"Yes, for you. From an old friend."

The bystanders saw Jarvis unroll the paper, and saw the glitter of yellow coins inside. Then they saw him hurry along the side of the lock after the boat, which was just getting clear of the lower gates, saw him hurl the coins at the stern of the launch, saw them hit it, and fall with the crumpled paper—a bank-note, who knows!—into the sparkling water.

The girl under the red parasol had turned to look at him, while he held the money in his hand, and he had seen her face. It was his wife.

That was the first time he had seen her since the night when he waited, sitting on the wooden bridge, watching the gap in the cornfield. He had not hunted for her, or in any way attempted to learn her whereabouts. She was a fallen angel. She had chosen to shut herself outside the gate of the paradise she had shared with him. She had deserted him, the comfortable lock-house—for to him it really seemed a most desirable residence, in spite of the want of creepers and roses that did so much for other lock-houses,—those duties of cooking tea, making the beds, and sweeping out, which, to a woman, should have been pleasures, and the thought of ever taking her back never entered his head.

He had accepted the thing as it happened, and thought very little of the man, whoever he might be, who had wrought the wrong. He was a grinning, feeble wretch, no doubt: a monkey in man's clothes, like the majority of that summer crowd which cumbered his rollers from morning to sundown. Should he ever be brought face to face with this pilferer of honest men's homes, he would know how to show his resentment and contempt, and one of the monkey-like herd would receive a lesson which might serve as a warning to the lot—that was all. There was no satisfaction in the thought of this possible vengeance; no hope that it would come speedily.

What he brooded on, day and night, was the baseness and black ingratitude of the deserter herself. The sense of his ill-treatment, of the monstrous injustice that had been done him by the girl he had taken in her hour of trouble, and freely welcomed to all the good things of his life, was as strong as if all the good things of this world had been his to give, as if she had forsaken a prince and a palace, instead of him and his hovel, and was as strong with him now, after a year, as on the day that he first felt it.

The winter was wearing on, and there was no sign of the cruel frost breaking. There had been snow, just enough to whiten the countryside, and then it had begun to freeze. Day after day tearing winds had swept up and down the valley, driving all living things to shelter; and night after night the cold had been sharper and deadlier. There was much distress in the neighbourhood. Farmers had found sheep and cattle frozen to death by scores; there was no end to the death-roll among the old and poor, and you could not take up a morning paper without meeting the ominous announcement, "Death from exposure."

In the early days of the frost great blocks of ice had floated down the river and begun to fill the entrance to the locks. In back-waters and shallows, where the water was quiet, a thick coat of ice had formed, and people were beginning to talk of the river being frozen over. Then the steam-tugs, which were plying up and down at the head of their barges, had to put on all steam and crunch through the floating mass that obstructed them. When they forced a passage through, and, for the time, got the better of the enemy, a cheer would go up from the bargees and any waterside characters ashore. But the enemy was too strong. Every hour its force increased. This blockade-running became more difficult for each of the tugs at every new attempt, and then at last impossible. There was no doubt now that the river might be frozen over. The doubtful point was, whether the defeated tugs would arrive safely at their moorings,

or get caught and hemmed in by the floating ice, to remain prisoners for a problematic period.

Now the enemy reigned supreme, and the river had felt the iron grip, almost throughout its length, for nearly three weeks. That ox, which people always are talking about in relation to great frosts, had long been roasted ; you could safely have cooked a drove of oxen in mid-stream ; a coach-and-four had been driven up and down the river without any mishap occurring.

The wind had gone down, and, in the strangely silent air, noises from the distant town reached Jarvis's ice-bound lock, and the beat of horses' feet passing along the high-road, half a mile off, sounded close at one's ear. In the snow-covered fields the lock and lock-house stood out black, and frowning, and solitary. The skaters, or sledgers, or ox-roasters, were busy higher up and lower down, and the reach by the willows was left day and night to the few birds of the air that had so far contrived to keep body and feathers together—and the frozen-out lockman.

The nights were not dark, though there was no moon. There was a pallid light, in which the naked trees and the open towing-path with the black buildings of the lock showed sharply and clearly-defined, and by which no shadows were thrown. This pale light was from the stars, which shone out so brightly in the rarefied air, and the curious glimmer of the stretching snow was strangely suggestive of those Polar regions of which one reads in books of adventure with delight. But there was no delight in this imitation of the eternal day of the higher latitudes ; no comfort to man or beast—except, perhaps, the skaters and ox-roasters—in the frozen air which seemed to nip one right through one's clothes, be they never so warm and woolly, which one knew was dealing death to right and left with merciless certainty.

Jarvis, who had been drinking at a public-house a mile down the road with a band of frozen-out bargees and dredging-men until the house was closed, felt the cold to his marrow and cursed it for its treatment of himself and his river. On

the threshold of his dwelling he looked up to the cruel sky, possibly in search of signs of relentment, and then took out the door-key from the pocket of his rough pea-jacket.

To his great surprise the door was not locked.

There was not much, perhaps, in the bare dwelling-room to tempt a thief of any ambition, but it was with an uncomfortable apprehension of finding that he had been plundered of his cooking-utensils, possibly of his bed-clothes, that the owner fumbled about for his matches. There was a faint red glow from the hearth, but not sufficient to grapple with the vault-like darkness of the narrow room. At last he had lit a match, found and lit the candle on the deal table; but even then it was a moment or two before it emitted sufficient light to show the lock-keeper what had happened in his absence.

Crouched down by the narrow hearth, like some animal that had crept into shelter to which it knew it possessed no right, lay his wife. Her bonnet had fallen by her side; she was dressed in what once had been finery and was now very nearly rags; she was thin and wasted, and shivering with cold and terror, as she looked up into her husband's face and stretched out her feeble hand beseechingly towards him.

"I have come back," she said, in a hoarse weak voice that he would hardly have recognized. "Tom, I have come back."

He had put the candle-stick down directly he saw her, and, while she spoke, he walked back to the door and opened it wide, and the icy night crept slowly into the room and seemed to freeze the very flame of the guttering tallow candle.

"I could not help it—I was mostly starving, and I thought I should have died last night. They wouldn't have me at the workhouse, and another night out would have killed me, so I came on here. I used my old key, Tom. I have kept it all along."

"Give it to me. Throw it down on the floor"—and she obeyed, and laid the key on the floor by the table.

"Shut the door, won't you, Tom? It's so dreadfully cold, and I ain't well. My chest's that bad I can hardly breathe."

He stood with his back to the open door, and looked thoughtfully down upon her. This draggled, hollow-eyed, shivering thing was his wife—the girl he had loved for her sunny smile, her vigorous beauty, her curling hair. This was what she had become in eighteen months. This was the consequence of cutting herself adrift from his protection and forsaking a comfortable home and a loving husband at the bidding of the first comer. It was almost with exultation that he thought of the promptness and completeness of the punishment ; and of its agreement with his own prophetic forecast.

And, at the first real pinch of hunger and cold, she had been driven back to the gates of the paradise she had forfeited so lightly. The parson—the meddlesome curate who must know everything and have his finger in every domestic pie—had tackled him on the subject of fallen angels only the other day. He had plumped himself down unasked, on one of the deal chairs, said he had come for a chat, and straightway begun to speak of the runaway wife. If ever she came back repentant and heavy of heart, it would be Jarvis's duty, as a Christian, to take her in and cherish her, to pour oil into her wounds, to smooth her pillow, and, ignoring the past, win the poor stray sheep back to the fold of the righteous. That was about the size of the parson's talk—thought Jarvis—as long as it had been put up with.

Well, his words had this sense in them, that she *had* come back. It was a pity the parson was not here too, to see the effect of his sermon. Still looking down upon her with bent brows and puckered forehead, he pointed significantly to the open door.

"You ain't a-going to turn me out to die of the cold," she moaned. "Tom, for the love of God, don't do that—I sha'n't burden you long. I'm that bad I can't be worse. Let me stop here in the warm"—and she struggled along the floor on her knees and clutched at his pointing hand, whining and fawning upon him. "I know how bad I treated you," she whined, "but ain't I punished? I would have done anything for you

when I had the money, only I never dared try. You flung my money into the water that day, and I never had so much again. I can sleep on the floor here—never mind me, only let me stop till to-morrow ; I swear I'll go on then."

He shook himself free before he answered, and she fell on the floor at his feet and still tried to cling to him.

"Get up and go. Didn't you get my message? You said you would never come back, and I said you never spoke a wiser word—Go."

"I won't go!" she howled. "Where am I to go to? I should be dead of cold long before I ever got to the town. Can't you see I am near dying already?" and she clung round his legs with the strength of despair. "I have a right to stop—I am still your wife. You may murder me, but you sha'n't turn me out."

"A right to stop! By God, that's good!" said the husband, with a fierce laugh. "Let go o' me—let go!"—and he dragged her, still struggling desperately, out through the open door, shut it, and sat down by the fireplace and began to fill his pipe.

He sat and smoked his pipe almost to the end, his eyes fixed on the closed door all the time.

He could hear her on the other side plainly enough, beating against the woodwork with all her force. In the dead silence of the room he could hear her footsteps on the frozen ground as she moved away and then returned. He could hear her shrieking entreaties to be let in again.

He heard them wailing on, until the beat on the door grew fainter and her shrill voice began to fail her. Then he thought he heard her fall, and the silence of the horrible night was unbroken for awhile. Then again he could hear her scratching and rubbing like a dog against the door. She was getting up again. Then the sounds of her slow footsteps told him that she was conquered—that she had given up all hope and was creeping off.

He laid down his pipe when the footsteps had died away,

and softly opened the door and looked out. She had gone. Cautiously screening himself, he looked up the towing-path. There she was—a black spot on the glimmering white—very slowly creeping on towards the town that she had been so fond of.

He watched her for a moment or two, to make quite sure that she was really moving away, and then, with a curse upon her head, shut himself in again.

She was found in the early morning, on the path through the snow-covered field, a stiff and ghastly bundle—frozen to death, they said, like the cattle that the farmers were losing night after night.

When Jarvis was released, after the verdict of the adjourned inquest, he was a less popular man than ever. Even the bargees and dredgers—his late companions—declined any longer to extend the hand of friendship. Naturally, he lost his lock, but it is not generally known that the authorities refrained from dismissing him. He still is lock-keeper. The lock is on a certain Thames tributary, where he goes about his work as of old, but oppressed with a heavy sense of the monstrous injustice that he, who never did anything to be ashamed of, has suffered.

LADY WRAGFORD'S MIRACLE

THE Honourable George Denville was talking, in the half-boisterous, half-maudlin, and wholly insupportable, manner unhappily characteristic of this young man late in the evening.

"When does the rotten old ball begin? I'm too tired to dance. I ought to be dancin' with the cook to-night—New Year's Eve—our servants' ball, at Old Wragford. 'Your place is among your own people,' Wimpleford says to me. 'Go back to your own people.'"

"Who is Wimpleford?" somebody asked.

"My brother—Lord Wimpleford, member of Parliament for North-West Devon, Under Secretary and future Prime Minister, and a stingy, interfering ass, if you ask my opinion," Mr. Denville replied.

It was a Saturday night—New Year's Eve, as Mr. Denville had remarked—and he and his friends had dined and gone to a theatre together. Now they had come to a restaurant for supper, and, presently, they were to go on to the Fancy Dress Ball. They were a party of six at the round table in the corner of the room:—three men, Mr. George Denville, Captain Carper Carpenter, Mr. Budsworth; and three ladies—Mrs. Cartwright, Mrs. Gordon, and Mrs. Parton-Hunt.

"Do tell 'em to open the wine, Carpenter," Mr. Denville continued. "I'll let 'em know one thing. I won't come here any more, if I am to be neglected. They are neglecting us now. If you fellows mean to submit to that sort of thing, I don't." And, by way of protest, Mr. Denville beat once or twice upon the table with a large spoon, and then began to tap

the tops of the glasses—but with so little discretion as to smash two slender-stemmed goblets into a hundred fragments.

One or two people at other tables looked round, smiling ; and Mrs. Cartwright, who was seated next to Mr. Denville, took the spoon away, and, smiling herself, begged him to be patient.

“ They clutter up the table with glasses, and *all empty*—all empty ! No sense in it. By Jupiter ! I'd like Smithers, our old butler at Wragford, to teach these beggars how to lay a table—just for once—that's all. They'd never forget it. Poor old Smithers—no nonsense about *him*. I haven't seen his honest face for more than a twelve-month ”—and the thought of the faithful old family servant appeared to awaken all the softer and more sentimental side of Mr. Denville's nature.

“ *He's* one of my own people. Been with us twenty years—before I was born : so he ought to be. If not—who the deuce are your own people ? ”

“ Why *don't* you go back to your own people ? ” asked Mrs. Gordon. She was a pretty, fair-haired woman, with bright blue eyes and a quick, animated way of talking. She leaned across the table laughing, while she asked the question. “ Don't you think your own people want you ? ”

“ Do they *want* me ? ” Mr. Denville echoed, slowly, and somewhat solemnly. “ Do they want me ? ” and he, too, laughed, but in a scornful manner.

. . . “ Why there's not a man, woman, or child on the place that *don't* want me. Sight for sore eyes, old what's-his-name at the home farm said I was. But his eyes may be sore or be damned. Never mind him. Perhaps it's my father you're aimin' at, Mrs. Gordon ? My father's all right, if you leave him alone, and *proud* of me. Yes, though I say it, proud of me as any peacock on the long terrace, if Wimpleford isn't there to get at him, and put him up to one of his shabby, cheese-parin' tricks.”

“ We're all proud of you, Georgy, old boy ! ” said Captain Carpenter good humouredly. He was a red-faced man of

about thirty-five : inclined to silence, but apparently brimming over with good nature and other amiable qualities.

"God bless you, Carper, I believe you are," Mr. Denville continued. "But if you are a friend of my brother's, Mrs. Gordon, tell him to leave my father alone. And leave him alone yourself," he added in a low tone, which was not intended to carry across the table. "Perhaps he has told you my mother doesn't adore me."

"I've never met your brother," said Mrs. Gordon, curtly. Possibly she *had* heard that muttered remark. "And I don't want to, or any other member of the family."

"*Shake*," said Mr. Denville loudly. "Shake on that," and he leaned across and grasped Mrs. Gordon's small, gloved hand, shaking it cordially, after an American fashion that he had picked up during a short trip to the great free country—a little jaunt contrived for him in a hurry by his friends and advisers, in order to give time for a certain matter "to blow over" in his native land.

"You are right there—keep to that," and he laughed, but suddenly turned grave. "Always excluding my father. *He's* all right—and, above all, the mater. You didn't mean *her*, I hope. No—leave her out—God bless her. What was I saying? Adore me? So she does. Does she want me? Does she cry her eyes out to get me back in the sleepy, stupid, old hole? Her favourite son, as Wimpleford knows and can't get round with all his tricks."

The supper had arrived at last ; and, while one waiter placed the dishes on the table, and another began to open the wine, Mr. Denville turned to Mrs. Cartwright, the lady on his left hand.

"Why, look here—look at this letter. That's not the Mater's handwriting, perhaps you'll say. I know better. Got it this morning," and he pulled out a crumpled letter from his breast pocket. "And if it was only her, down at Wragford, I'd go back like a bird."

"Put the letter away," said Mrs. Cartwright, in a low voice, "if it really is from your mother."

"Of course it is. Who else do you suppose? I want you to read it. Read it right through, every word of it. . . . No? . . . But I want you to see if I haven't spoken the truth. What? Eh? . . . Oh, she was only trying to pull my leg—I don't care if she was; and I don't care—— All right. But I *do* value your opinion, and I ask you to read it and see for yourself."

The room had grown fuller; there was a buzz of voices, a clatter of knives and forks on all sides; and the little party in the corner were as busy with their supper as if they had not dined heavily three and a half hours before, while Mrs. Cartwright sat back in her chair, and read the letter—every word of it, as requested by her young friend.

It was a long letter, written in a small and shaky hand on several sheets of thick white paper. There was an embossed coronet, high golden balls and low gilt leaves, with an initial beneath, on each of the sheets, together with the address, "Old Wragford House, N. Devon," in small, black lettering, and across the corner, in still smaller type, the further directions—"Station, Wragford Road, L.S.W.R." and "Telegraph Office, Wragford Park."

"My own dearest boy," the mother began, "do you know that it is more than a year since you left in anger, with nothing but harsh words for the Mother who bore you and who would lay down her life gladly if, by so doing, she could purchase happiness and security for you in this world and the world to come."

Yes. The young man had, in this matter, spoken the truth. However strange it might seem to his London circle, this poor lady in the distant west country seemed still to harbour affection for her errant offspring.

If he would only be forbearing to those who loved him, and wished nothing but his welfare—the letter proceeded—life might yet be made easy and pleasant. Then the writer involved herself in a mass of explanation, an apologetic tracing out of the past, mingled with little bursts of prayer for the

future, invocations to God and her son and blind chance : and Mrs. Cartwright read on, immeasurably surprised at the tone of the composition. No word of protest from the deeply injured parent, but the humble pleading of some poor debtor to a remorseless and insatiable creditor.

God knew, and naturally, Wimpleford, a married man with children of his own and interests to protect, knew also, of the repeated sacrifices his father had made to save his son's name from disgrace and dishonour. Much of state, aye and of comfort, had been abated down Wragford way. All had shared in the rigid economy. The very villagers and peasants had felt the pinch produced by her darling prodigal in his ceaseless draining out and squeezing dry. The poor father had suffered—oh, he had suffered ! you could see that in his face—under the necessity of a merciless retrenchment. To descend in the county's scale of importance from the top, almost to the bottom, must be bitter at his time of life—to be no longer known as the large-hearted, open-handed nobleman, builder of schools and hospitals, guarantor of Hunt subscriptions, and financial upholder of the good political faith of his ancestors, must be very bitter—and to turn away the poor alms-cravers empty and unrelieved, bitterest of all. But his lordship would make no complaints, would not, by slightest hint or subtlest allusion, touch on all those past matters which had caused dissension and discord. He would force himself to believe that a new, fair, white page in his son's history was at last to be turned upward, if only the prodigal would return to his sorrowing female parent.

Then the poor mother invoked the remoter past. Surely her darling boy had not changed utterly ? “ You were such a loving child, dearest, so tender, so yielding—more to me, much more than the others. My sunny, curly-haired, baby boy, my consolation, my delight, winding yourself about my heart from the first, as the others never did.”

Mrs. Cartwright glanced round to her neighbour after reading this passage—and wondered. The Honourable George

was only trifling with his food, but there was no make-belief or polite pretence about his drinking. Flushed and heated, puffy of cheek, shiny of gill, he leered at her, above his glass, with fish-like, lack-lustre eyes. She looked at his fat neck, bulging over his collar ; at the queer little twist of his ear, small and well shaped, but heavy of lobe with a crease of flesh in front of it, a fold from the puffy cheeks. She looked, seeking for some trace, some faint relic of the sunny darling. Yes, his closely-cropped hair showed a tendency to curl at the side of the forehead. Verily he was the darling.

"Then have pity on me, dearest, and come back this New Year and bring hope and joy once more to your poor old mother. It won't be so dull as you think. It *shan't* be dull. Everything shall be done to make you happy. And think, dear, in very truth, I am old and the time to do this may, God knows, be all too short before you. I know what grief it would be to my dearest boy to reflect later on that it was too late to grant my request."

"Whatever are you thinking of, Edith ?" asked Mrs. Hunt of Mrs. Cartwright. "You set there like a skeleton at the feast. Doesn't she now, Captain ?"

Mrs. Cartwright laughed ; folded the letter and put it away in her pocket ; and sipped a little wine, but did not offer any conversation to add to the hilarity of the company. They were all chattering and laughing, Mr. Denville included, and she was left alone with her thoughts for a few moments.

What was pretty Mrs. Cartwright thinking about ? She was—in the very widest use of the phrase—a woman of the world. To please one half of the world was in fact the hard necessity of her life. Although her visitors' list—had she drawn one out—would have contained the names of many men of good social position, she enjoyed no opportunities of intimacy with ladies of rank. Thus, if she were now conjuring up a presentment of that lonely old countess in her great, silent house on the Devonshire uplands, she must build the picture from humbler material than any personal experience of high life in

the country. Heaven knows on what the fond old woman's letter had set her brooding, to the neglect of gay companions and good cheer. But perhaps some story she had once heard—something imagined or remembered—brought sharply and clearly before her half-closed eyes the figure of an elderly woman pottering about a house with heavy footfall, shaking hand, and a heart broken because there had gone from her a beloved child, who still lived, but far better had been dead. If it were so, the humbler figure might serve in all essentials for the more exalted mourner.

"Edith!" said Mrs. Hunt sharply. "Don't set there like a statue. *Whatever* are you thinking of?"

Presently, in the restaurant hall, a sun-burnt, stalwart young man came up to Mrs. Cartwright and wished her a happy New Year. He was a Guardsman who had returned to town after having, to a certain extent, distinguished himself in the field.

"And the same to you, and many of them," said Mrs. Cartwright, without looking up from the pages of a book which the hall-porter had just procured for her.

"I say," said the young man, confidentially, "I see you're with a party, but can't you shake 'em off and come on to the ball—with us? I wish you would."

"Not possible!" said Mrs. Cartwright, putting down the book. "Besides I'm so tired that I don't think I shall go at all."

Upstairs, people were making a great noise. The head-waiter had beaten twelve times upon a gong, to simulate the midnight hour booming from Big Ben; some hired singers had begun chaunting "Auld Lang Syne"; many voices of amateurs joined in the chorus; and now, through the swinging hall-doors, the clanging peals of church bells floated in with the jingle of harness and the clatter of horses' hoofs.

Mr. Denville was in the vestibule, putting on his big fur coat and muffler, and telling the attendant that good people

were scarce and required careful wrapping up against the chill night air, while he contrived to knock down all the silk hats within reach and to upset the plate of sixpences and shillings invitingly laid out on a chair by the entrance.

"I wish you would," the young soldier was whispering. "We have a large box and there's several people you know. It's sure to be fun." And then, as Mr. Denville approached, he added some reflection about the folly of not "chucking over" such an undesirable acquaintance when requested to do so.

"Who the deuce was that fellow you were talkin' to?" asked Mr. Denville, rather angrily, while the tall Guardsman ascended the staircase.

"Why, Chiddingfold, of course," said Mrs. Cartwright. "He was talking about you when you came up."

"Hi! Chiddingfold! Chiddingfold, my dear fellow!" Mr. Denville roared. "I never recognized you. Most ridiculous thing! Come down and have a drink—drink the New Year in."

But Chiddingfold, leaning over the banisters, declined this invitation.

"I really am too tired," said Mrs. Cartwright to Mrs. Hunt and Mrs. Gordon. "If I tried to dance I should just faint. It was so frightfully hot at that stupid play. I shall drive straight home and go to bed."

Then she turned to Mr. Denville.

"I'll drive you with me, George, if you like."

"If *you* like," said Mr. Denville. "Drive me how and where you like. . . . Drive me out of my mind, you beautiful creature," he added, in a sudden access of gallantry.

Mrs. Cartwright told her coachman, a small man buried in an immense fur cape, to drive to Colosseum Mansions—on the first floor of which huge barracks her flat was situated.

"I didn't want to go to the rotten ball," Mr. Denville was saying, for the third or fourth time. "But I couldn't think of an excuse. Racked my brain to get out of it—but couldn't think of an excuse. But you got me out of it. You did it so

jolly well, too. You are an artful old girl when you like"—and then Mr. Denville began to sing in a tuneless voice :

"Oh have you seen my girl ?
Ain't she just a little pearl ?
Etc., etc., etc."

"Don't make such a noise for Heaven's sake," said Mrs. Cartwright. And Mr. Denville, finding his music ill appreciated, fell into a sleepy, but resentful silence until the carriage stopped.

"Wait," said Mrs. Cartwright to the coachman ; and, without a word to her companion, she made her way through the stone hall and up the shallow stone staircase to her own door, which she opened with a latchkey.

"Go into the drawing-room, George."

Mr. Denville, who had followed, wearily leaning on the baluster rail and shuffling his feet from step to step like a drowsy child coming home from the pantomime, did as he was bidden.

Mrs. Cartwright's maid had appeared in the little hall as soon as the key made itself audible in the lock. A good little maid, ready and waiting to take cloak and fan from her mistress.

"Well, you *are* 'ome early," George heard the servant say, as he made his way to the drawing-room fire. "Not bin to the ball after all ? Well I never !"

It was a pretty little room. Parquetry floor, electric light under coloured shades, white wood ceiling, and overmantel rich with imitation carving, heavy tapestry curtains, Chippendale tables loaded with silver and photographs, more than one book here and there—in fact, the conventional, well-furnished flat drawing-room.

Mr. Denville took up his position before the tiled hearth ; threw his fur coat away, aiming at one of the amber satin chairs and attaining the parquetry floor ; thought of poking up a blaze with the little brass poker ; nearly fell into the fire ;

then stood warming his broad back and stolidly musing until the return of the hostess.

"Well, George!" said Mrs. Cartwright. "I've been thinking. And I'll tell you what it is. You've got to go home to your mother."

"Got to go to the devil!" said George. "What are you talking about?"

"After what she says, you *must* go. You must go at once."

"Look here—I don't know if *you* are tryin' to pull my leg. But I don't like it—it wounds me."

"I mean it, George. I'm in earnest. Your mother wants you."

"And what's that got to do with you? I'd be much obliged if people would leave my mother's name alone. I'm not aware that you are a personal friend of the mater's. I'll swear I never introduced you to her."

His puffy cheeks had flushed redder, and his words came slow, but wonderfully well articulated under the effort of will made possible by his indignation. He stood glaring at her—with his crumpled white shirt, his soiled white waistcoat and faded white flower, a pitiable, oh, most pitiable, embodiment of ruin and degradation. Sodden with drink, destroyed by drink; heart, brain, and soul decomposed and washed away by drink; with really less self-control than a monkey, less rational affection than a toad, with thoughts and impulses no more reliable or valuable than alcoholic fumes rising off a vat, with intellect no more working than strong spirit can be said to work when it bubbles in a pot or seethes above a fire; yet the wretched creature—Mrs. Cartwright forced herself to remember—was still wanted, badly wanted, down Wragford way, North Devon.

"No—I am very fond of you, Edith. An' you have been very good to me. But there are some things I can't stand and, if you ask me, I call it deuced bad form."

"But you made me read the letter, and I've been thinking.

Your mother may be ill. She reminds you she is old. Old people easily get ill, and, with them, it's always dangerous."

"What d'you say? Don't talk so fast," said George angrily.

"I say she may be ill—now—very ill. For all you know, she may be dying."

"Oh what a damn cruel thing to say—about the mater. Oh! oh! oh!" and Mr. Denville's fat cheeks fell, his full lip dropped, and he burst into tears.

"Oh, who told you that?" he sobbed. "Wimpleford's been gettin' at you. It's some lie of his. I won't believe it;" and he sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands, sobbing violently. "The poor old mater—dyin'! How do you know she's dyin'? Why in hell haven't they got Sir John Thingumibob? Stingy devils!"

"Don't cry, George," said Mrs. Cartwright kindly; and she put her hand on his shaking back. "Don't cry—I only said she *may* be ill, and that you ought to go and see her. Now, look here, I've found there's a train, on Sunday mornings, leaving at one-thirty. I found it in the A.B.C. It only goes Sunday mornings, but I suppose it's all right. I'll drive you over to Waterloo. There's heaps of time, and you can go down by that and be there before breakfast."

"Of course I'll go," said George, looking up and taking his hands from his face. His poor swollen cheeks were wet and glistening, and streaked with dirt where his fingers had pressed them: his poor lack-lustre eyes were wet and bloodshot.

"Of course I'll go. And I'll take Sir John What's-his-name with me, if I have to drag the old hog out of his damn bed myself. The poor old mater!" he sobbed, and spluttered.

"No—no. Go yourself, George. That's all she wants. And look here. Mabel says you left a suit of clothes in a bag in the bath-room—last time you dressed here. You must change into them: and I'll lend you a tie—a red one. I should like you to look your best."

"You *are* a brick," said George almost cheerfully ; and then, immediately, he began to moan again.

"But I haven't any money. How the devil am I to buy a ticket? They wouldn't trust me even if they knew the mater was dyin'. Oh, oh, oh ! I have only eighteen-pence," and he groped in his pockets. "I know that's all, 'cos old Carper had to pay for the supper, and when I wanted to give the waiter a sovereign I promised him I hadn't got it."

"I'll buy your ticket for you," said Mrs. Cartwright.

Slowly and heavily, the long train dragged its way westward through the night, dropping coaches here and there in the darkness, and taking up parcel vans from wind-blown, desolate sidings in the grey flicker of dawn ; till the cold morning light made it gleam like a dusty, frost-bitten snake as it crept out of its hole on the other side of Exeter station. With a grating of wheels and a creaking of axles, it wound over the alien metals leading northwards. Then, with a grunt and a jerk, as of pleasure in freedom from obligation to a rival company, it glided away on to its own property and faced the Devonshire slopes and valleys sparkling and white in the full rays of the wintry sun.

Limp and drooping in the corner of a first-class carriage, with his back to the engine, his fur collar about his ears, a rug over his knees and a foot-warmer under his patent leather shoes, the Honourable George Denville was shown by the pale and frosty light, deep sunk in swinish slumber.

The same kind friend who had so placed him—after purchasing his ticket and putting some loose silver in his pockets—had seen him locked into his compartment, under custody of a guard solemnly pledged to keep his charge warm in transit and duly and faithfully ensure delivery at the little North Devon station. Then the kind friend, having left a telegram to be despatched as soon as the office should open, had

driven home through the silent and slippery London streets, and had gone to bed.

With the chirruping of birds in his ears, the tinkle of cow bells and church bells near and far, Mr. Denville returned to consciousness—consciousness of a slightly acuter form than that of his evening hours, and wearily set himself to solve the riddle of his presence on the North Devon line at a wayside station not many miles from the land of his own people. His mouth was dry, and his collar and red silk tie were damp and heavy from perspiration. His head and his limbs ached; his neck felt as if it had been dislocated; and he knew that his fur cuff was dusty and full of grit as drowsily he passed it across his face.

Oh, yes—he was coming home. His mother had wished it and he had decided to gratify her, in a hurry, late last night. He had made up his mind suddenly; and here he was. Sunday morning! Quite so—and, with many a piglike grunt and splutter, the heavy head drooped again and Mr. Denville fell back into the country of misty visions, mingled voices, and foggy oblivion.

He was surprised to find a footman waiting on the platform, when the guard turned him out into the crisp bright air which felt like a cold bath; and the footman was surprised to hear that there was no luggage for the cart.

“’Er ladyship is waiting in the brome, sir,” said the footman, taking the proffered ticket from the guard; and Mr. Denville, hunching his big shoulders and shivering, shuffled through the booking office to the outer door.

“Well—he’m be back sune,” said one of the porters, following the fur coat with attentive eyes.

“Yes. Sure enough, he’m be come hoam again,” and the other porter added a west-country oath and shook his fist after the receding figure in rustic pantomime.

“O my dear, you have come back,” said Lady Wragford, clasping her son’s hand as he seated himself by her side in the brougham. “You have come back. My boy, my boy!” And each word was gulped out in a voice struggling with

tears, and, at each little struggle, the thin delicate hand clutched the coarse one with a spasmodic and involuntary twitch of the muscles.

The footman, a Londoner, took his place by the old coachman, and the fine black horses, tossing their heads and snorting as the keen air entered their open nostrils, trotted away—over the stone bridge that spans the river Wimple, past church and school, and, with a break of pace, a checked canter, a quickly curbed bound or two, swung along the upland road which leads to Old Wragford House.

"'E looks a beauty, don't 'e," the footman was whispering confidentially. "Just off the booze, I reckon. If you wos to prick 'im the juice 'ud run out of 'im."

"He'm be sune come hoam again," said the Devonshire coachman moodily, with eyes on the white, hard road where it showed above his horses' ears.

"When I got your dear telegram, an hour ago, my heart nearly stopped beating—the joy of it, dear. You had it sent from Waterloo, didn't you, dear?"

"What telegram?" Mr. Denville began to ask vaguely, but seeing the pink paper folded in his mother's hand, he nodded his head; then, taking it from her, glanced at the message.

"I am coming home, as you wish, Honourable George Denville."

"The way it was signed puzzled me for a moment, but then I understood that my darling was really coming, and that he had told some servant or ignorant person to telegraph the good news."

"Yes," said the Honourable George, "that's about the size of it."

"My own brave boy," the poor lady continued. "You are so big and strong," and she patted his arm, "but you look tired and pale after your journey. Our good air will build you up—will build you up in no time," and she stole a half fearful glance at his face and then withdrew her eyes quickly.

"Tell me, dear, when was it that you made up your mind to come back to me?"

"Well," said George, thoughtfully, "only yesterday. To tell you the truth, I got the funks on board, last night. Got it into my head, suddenly, that you were ill—regularly bad."

Lady Wragford began to tremble.

"When did you think that? What time of night was it?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh late—devilish late—I know that."

"After midnight?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said George. "But you ain't ill, *are* you? You look pretty fit. I regularly got the funks on board that you were desperately bad."

"My darling," cried the mother, bursting into tears. "My darling boy," and she clutched his arm convulsively.

The parson standing by the vestry door had taken off his hat as they passed; the two schoolmistresses, returning arm in arm from early service, had bowed to the flying wheels; caps were touched and hats doffed on either side. Where the brougham rattled by the noble farmhouses, solid and weather-tight as fortresses, built of the clean west-country stone by the good Earl John eighty years ago, where the horses' hoofs rung out louder and clearer under the great walls of churchlike barns and outbuildings, men and women and children made reverence and stood staring.

From beneath clipt yew porches, and leaning on oak gates, the apple-faced matrons and sturdy grey-haired yeomen looked after the varnished panels. All along the stone-edged road, his own people crept out from homestead and cottage and stable—and groaned as the carriage swept by.

They had all felt the weight of his hand upon them—as certainly and as heavily as though they had been his serfs and he the prince of some vast estate in further Russia. In the sweat of their brows and the labour of their hands each one had suffered something, forgone some hope, missed some joy,

for his sake. To them he was an ogre, a devouring monster, a maw to glut—with their all.

“He’m bin swallowing the chalk sore needed and promised by lardship to my ridge pastures,” groaned one. “Bin filling his belly with galvanized guttering to keep my yard dry foot, and now come back for more,” groaned another. “Bin spending my surface drains to his wenches,” and so on and so forth.

And yet, with that strange instinct which gives wisdom to the dullest to trace out the cause of personal injury through the most complex and involved labyrinth of circumstances, they *understood*, however queerly they worded their complaint. They understood that they were made to suffer, unjustly, foolishly, uselessly. From the grave and venerable rector to the idlest child at the village school, each and all had grasped the problem and mastered it. The babbling child had felt the pinch and burden of it, as surely as the ex-fellow of his college, and could have laid the matter before you as lucidly and as convincingly.

“’Tis fairly hopeless. He’m best in Nebriates Hoam now. Should a just bin bankrupted and left years ago.”

You would have found the answer, glib and smooth, on baby lips and in a piping treble, wherever you sought it among the little ones.

That which was a mystery to friends and relatives—how one swollen young man, entirely dependent on his father, with no expectations but his parents’ good will, can bring utter and most damnable ruin on a whole family—was clear as noonday to these slow-witted rustics. First they saw the palpable signs of the ruin: great signs and little signs, everything that eye could see. The brougham of antique shape; the tarnished brass, the fading coronet on the cracking panel; the teeth in the mouths of the black horses, the last of that noble stud of horses which his lordship loved to breed, teeth indicating extreme age and fast-coming decrepitude; the shockingly old-fashioned shape of her ladyship’s mantle, made in Exeter and rusty with wear; closed rooms, and barren walls with patches

of fresher coloured paper where the pictures used to hang ; discharged servants ; worn-out liveries ; empty halls, blistering paint, decaying timber, shifted tiles, missing slates, plate boxes used to store apples, strong cupboards and safes with the locks full of cobweb and rust—close fist and short commons. They saw and understood—saw his lordship, in pepper and salt instead of pink, slink down to the meet of the fox-hounds which once were his, a shabby old man on a shabby old horse ; and their minds hardened against him because of the folly of the thing. They understood and made allowances for pride—as some of his well-to-do friends never did. Pride is a fine thing, but a man should know when he is beaten : and the old man should have known that years ago.

They knew that *he*, the enemy, was aware that he held them all in the hollow of his hand and that he would surely squeeze them dry. That he, too, understood what pride meant and that he intended pride should be paid for. Without one redeeming touch of grandness in his vices, he would carry through the mystery to the remorseless end and show the world how a family, a community, a territory, can be spent with nothing on the face of the whole broad earth to show for the spending. If a glass of brandy-and-water in London cost a thousand pounds to Wragford, he would still gulp it down when athirst. A prey to everything vile, everything foul, everything dishonouring, clever in nothing but the manufacture of disgrace, the particular and well-thought-out smirch upon the good name which that pride most dreaded :—of course, so long as you paid, he was the bottomless pit itself. Pay and send him abroad, pay and send him to the colonies, and he would come back to extract more. Pay and send him to the Devil and the Devil would write home to say he had committed an act which, if not illegal in Hell, came so perilously near the Devil's Law of Felony that your wisest, and indeed only, course was to pay and fetch him away. Then why go on fighting ? Why not own yourself beaten, and quit fighting and paying, and leave him to the Devil's Law ?

This was the view of all his own people, as they came out in the sparkling sunlight, at the glad birth of the New Year, and cursed him as he rolled by.—Cursed him by their leaky roofs and broken walls and undrained fields, by the lack of allowance in hard times, by forced sales and poor markets, by their neglected cricket grounds and exploded clubs, by winter dole refused, and Christmas feast suspended, by children's cloaks withdrawn and grannies' tea withheld ;—by the totally vanished sovereign and the painfully rare half-crown, they cursed him from the bottom of their hearts, as he passed homeward.

In the name of sound and substantial repair, in the name of give-and-take, kind landlords and good tenants, permanent improvements and rent after the rate of five per centum per annum thereon, was there any sense, justice, or reason in letting the mystery run its course? Well, there *was* one reason—and the tenants knew that too.

His mother, who loved him, willed it so. It would break her heart to abandon him to his fate.

She was speaking now, as the elderly blacks gallantly breasted the hill below the park gates.

"I don't say that it was exactly a miracle, dear," she was tremulously explaining. "It was His infinite goodness surely working, as it works always, and there is no miracle in that. But, still—— Mary had left me, and I was all alone, with the curtains drawn tight to shut out the sound of the joy bells."

"They do make a row," said George kindly.

"You don't know how I have suffered through the long year, without once looking on your face, and then I thought of the New Year that they were ringing in without you. We had no servants' ball, you know—and I cried, dear, oh, I cried my eyes out, while I knelt and tried to pray."

"I hope you had a fire in the room," said George.

"I prayed, and, at last, I grew calmer and my prayers seemed to go up, dear. I felt that it was good prayer. I prayed Him to send you home—I implored His divine intercession.

I besought Him to send one of His Angels of Pity to soften your heart, my darling, and turn your thoughts to your poor old mother's misery.

"And then," her ladyship continued, swayed by a gust of emotion and shaking with fervour, "I slept calmly and peacefully, as I haven't done for a year : and, in the morning, they woke me with your dear message in their hands. My boy, my boy ! Then I knew that He *had* heard my prayer and, in His mercy, prompt as the lightning, but bountiful as the sun, had flashed His command upon you to come home by the first train."

AT THE SIBYLLINE PRICE

I

YOUNG Mr. Francis Bray had good health, good means, good looks. He was quite independent—without parents, guardians, cousins, or aunts to worry or molest him ; with no irksome tasks to perform, no onerous duties to evade ; with only himself to think of. One might well feel envy when one considered how handsomely Fate had dealt with him. But really he was like a well-rigged, well-found ship sent upon the sea of life with insufficient sailing orders. He went no steadfast voyage, but just where it seemed best at the moment.

Thus, in the drowsy summer weather, running before the light winds of chance, he had come to Greypont on the south coast. An idle friend had been with him, but had found the place boring and had gone. Mr. Frank stayed on by himself, and found the place amusing—because of a girl.

Ethel was the very nicest sea-side girl you ever saw, tall and slim, neat and trim, pretty and pert ; but with sadness as well as laughter in her blue eyes—like the blue sea. Her hair was of that attractive dark brown which flashes red in bright sunshine or strong electric light ; her face was just brown enough to make her teeth seem dazzlingly white ; but her hands were so brown that at a little distance she seemed to be wearing gloves. She scarcely ever wore real gloves. Her favourite dress had been made at home, and the whole thing cost less than thirty shillings. It was blue, with large white spots, and the blue kept itself to itself when you washed it ; the top part, or bodice, and the underpart, or skirt, were divided or kept

together by a white leather belt; and round the neck of it was a soft collar made of lace of the very cheapest description. Mr. Frank Bray liked the dress immensely, and when he walked with it up and down the promenades and piers—and he did so constantly—these two tall young people made a fine pair. It seemed to old folk on the benches and in the bath chairs that Fate had linked the couple and set them moving together.

Sometimes the young man squabbled with the dress, was petulant, fretful, almost rude; and when he was rude he was promptly called to order.

“Ethel. Who was that ass that stopped you—and what the dickens was he talking about?”

While Miss Ethel Morgan chatted with the other young man, Mr. Frank Bray had stood by the promenade railings, and, setting his clean-shaved face as a flint, had stared down in haughty contempt, at the harbour, the two stone piers, the pleasure steamer, and the tourists crawling like black ants about the black landing-stage.

“He is not an ass,” and Miss Ethel’s blue eyes flashed indignantly. “He is an old friend—and please to remember you are quite a new one.”

Then, as he walked on in glum and dumb and stupid discontent, she laughed.

“How silly you are. You know you don’t mind a bit—really—who I talk to or how long I talk to them.”

But he did mind. It was she who made the place amusing by walking and talking with him, and if she walked and talked with any one else, he felt immediately that his occupation was gone and that he must pack his portmanteau and take the train to London.

“He ought to be a very old friend indeed for you to let him stop you like that, and talk to you in such a free-and-easy way. If you know him so well, why don’t you tell him to take his hands out of his pockets when he is speaking to a lady? Who is he?”

Ethel laughed and did not answer ; but, after a few more such questions, she flashed her eyes again.

“Why shouldn’t I talk to who I choose ? *You* have no right to object.”

Poor Ethel always came back to that, and it always jarred. It always set him thinking. She said it in all innocence. It was a plain statement of fact—given with a nice girl’s proper defiance : not in the least a nasty, crafty, leading-up phrase intended to put him in trouble. But it set him thinking that perhaps it was time to pack the portmanteau and go to seek amusement somewhere else.

But he did not pack. He stayed on—at the big hotel on the east cliff. Of a hot, sleepy afternoon, when he had eaten his good lunch, drunk his cup of coffee, and smoked his cigar, he would come lazily out beneath the striped awning of the porch and lazily stretch himself, while he stared at Greypoint as though he had never seen it before.

On the east cliff there is the big hotel, a bandstand, a long promenade, and then open country—hedgeless cornfields, with the white cliffs lessening till they drop into a sandy bay, where stands the queer hospital with its patients, wrapped in rugs, dozing in the sunlight upon the granite-walled terrace. The hospital is the end of the east cliff—the end of the world one might almost say.

Then, in the middle, you have Greypoint’s busy harbour, the narrow crowded streets of the town, stretching back inland to a quite considerable distance, full of noisy visitors and trippers, costermongers’ barrows, chars-à-bancs, nigger minstrels, and what not ugly and unwelcome. But beyond all this noise and vulgarity and ignorant happiness, the west cliff rises sharply to give you, on top, another bandstand and promenade, wide peaceful lawns and spacious crescents, the clubhouse, with the innumerable villas, cottages, bungalows of the residents.

Ethel Morgan and her family were residents, not visitors :

so it was on the west cliff that Mr. Bray always looked for Ethel.

As he came questing from cliff to cliff, it used to seem to him that the town was full and yet empty. He passed through meaningless throngs, a confused and senseless babel, ugly sights and ugly sounds, until all at once everything changed and became all right again. He had seen the white parasol, or the white spots on the blue ground that he was looking for. It was all right. She was on the end seat, farthest from the band, a long way off. All right now—no hurry.

It was not that the sight of her made the sunlight brighter or the music sweeter, or that it caused his heart to leap and his pulse to flutter—but it had this undoubted power : it turned Greypont from a meaningless, boring, rotten sort of place into a pleasant amusing resort for a summer holiday.

“Reading a letter, I see.”

“Yes,” said Ethel, smiling. “How clever of you to see that ;” and, as he sat down beside her, she folded the flimsy sheets of her letter and patted them lovingly. “You see *everything*. But did you see Dick or Raleigh on your way up ?”

“Yes. I saw them both.”

“What are they doing ?”

“They have gone for a bicycle ride.”

“Then *you* gave them the money. You really are a dear to them——”

Dick and Raleigh were Ethel's small brothers. They were two brown-faced little shrimps who dressed in blue flannel shirts and white flannel knickers, who were habitually coatless, and whose passionate delight it was to hire bicycles and go for an hour's furious riding. Mr. Bray had, on more than one occasion, given them the necessary shilling apiece to set them spinning while he lounged with Ethel. They would come back radiantly perspiring, to thank their benefactor and to enjoy his society. For his largesse and his affability and his attention to sister Ethel, Raleigh and Dick really loved their big friend Mr. Bray.

"You are a dear to have given them the money," said Ethel cordially, and then sadness showed in the kind blue eyes. "Poor little chaps. They are going to school in a week."

Mr. Bray knew nearly all the family by now, and all about the family. The head of it was Captain Morgan: the tall thin man who passed his children without recognizing them—not because he wished to cut them, but because he was on his way to play whist at the white-fronted club, and already his eager thoughts had reached the card-room and were busy unpacking the cards, shuffling, and perhaps misdealing because again he had omitted to extract "the jolly joker." On very hot days Captain Morgan wore white duck trousers. He played his shilling whist from tea-time to dinner, and again in the evening if they could make up a rubber—and really that was all one could say about Captain Morgan. Mr. Bray had wondered if by any chance the captain, seeing him and Ethel sitting together, would think it his duty to ask Mr. Bray what were his intentions. Mr. Bray would of course have answered that he was quite without intentions of any sort. But he soon came to understand that the head of the family was like the head of a mountain—half its time in the clouds.

There was another sister, Harriet, who was not good-looking like pretty Ethel. In fact, she was almost plain. She had weak eyes and wore ugly glasses with gold rims. Ethel said her heart was made of gold also; but she was shy: with the hesitating gait and awkward gestures of very short-sighted people; and Mr. Bray did not trouble himself about her.

Irene, still another sister, at seventeen had been far, far better-looking than Ethel. Miss Ethel assured him of this fact, and her blue eyes were veiled with sadness while she dwelt on Irene's beauty. But Irene was dead, so she too was quite out of the running, and Mr. Bray did not bother about *her*.

Poor mamma was a confirmed invalid. She lay on a sofa all day long—an invisible presence, so far as visitors were concerned; a low voice sounding through an open door; still perhaps a presiding spirit of home; but to casual visitors, nothing

at all, an unseen phantom that would never come from the darkness to show itself and frighten one. Going out and coming in, Ethel always entered poor mamma's room, and spent a few minutes with the gentle home-spirit. That was all mamma seemed to expect of her children—that they would report themselves whenever they were at leisure.

Beyond the home circle, out of reach of the invalid's feverish hand, far beyond the carrying power of her low voice, there were Ethel's two big brothers—David and Bill. David was in Australia; it was some time since the family had heard from him; and there was anxiety. Bill was in the States, on a ranch, doing well; and he wrote home frequently—interminable letters in a great schoolboy hand on thin paper. They were family letters, for all to read in turn. Mr. Bray did not, in truth, harass himself with any serious thoughts for Bill and David, but he was compelled to talk about them because Ethel was so fond of them.

"We have heard from Bill again," said Ethel, smoothing the rumpled sheets. "I only wish we could hear from David."

"Oh, I expect David's all right. Where is he, do you say?"

"In Australia—Melbourne, when we last heard. Father says he thinks he has completely gone under. He said that at dinner last night. He said David is probably ashamed to own it—but very likely he has gone under altogether."

"Oh, let's hope not," said Mr. Bray politely. "What does he say for himself in the letter?"

"This is from Bill—I just told you."

"I beg your pardon, of course. Well, what does Bill say for himself?"

"Heaps and heaps. He writes so splendidly," said Ethel with enthusiasm. "Describes everything so that you feel you are there. I believe old Bill would make his fortune if he ever took to writing books."

"I should stick to cattle-punching if I were Bill."

"Would you? But you don't know what a hard life it is.

. . . Look here. I haven't finished it yet," and Ethel drew closer to him on the bench. "You may read it with me—if you like."

Mr. Frank Bray always liked sitting close to Ethel: so, looking over her shoulder, he glanced here and there at Bill's letter, while she read greedily.

" . . . Then we three slept out again."—It seemed the usual cattle-punching yarn, without beginning, middle, or end. —"You must remember nothing had passed our lips since that coffee which I mentioned on the day before yesterday. The beasts had disappeared like smoke over the skyline, and we knew now if we did not round them up before we touched the foothills we were all done brown," etc., etc.

Glancing here and there, sitting quite close to Ethel, Mr. Frank seemed to recognize the sort of rough material from which Bret Harte and other masters wove their delightful tales; but, in Bill's uncertain hand, it seemed to Frank devoid of all interest.

"Dear old Bill," said Ethel, folding her letter and putting it away, "I do admire him for his pluck—and his grit. He will do big things before he comes back to us."

"I hope he will," said Mr. Bray. "Anyhow, I don't see why your father should say he has gone under."

"He said that of *David*," said Ethel very reproachfully. "This is Bill—as I told you."

"Yes—of course. I beg your pardon. The fact is, my mind had wandered. Look here, Ethel. I was thinking—the band plays on the east cliff to-night—just outside the hotel. Couldn't you come and listen to the band—about nine o'clock—or say, a quarter past?"

"I could if I wanted to," said Ethel, "but I'm not sure that I do."

It really was time to pack at last. He had stayed at the big hotel until he was the oldest inhabitant. But now, with ten warm September days ruled off the calendar, an uncle and

some partridges in Hampshire were calling for him. It was time to go.

In these drowsy lazy days he had seen more and more of the Morgan family, and more and more of Ethel. He and she made a handsome pair, strolling round the bandstand, where the lamplight and the moonlight threw fantastic shadows and made one's straw hat yellow on one side and white on the other, or sauntering far afield in the gay sunlight—as far as, and sometimes farther than, the sandy bay where the poor consumptive patients lay smiling in the rugs which Charity had wrapt about them. Old folk on penny chairs or in half-crown flies thought they were an engaged couple.

That was nonsense, a foolish jumping to conclusions—as Ethel told her little brother, Raleigh.

“He loves you more than his dinner,” said Raleigh, “because he came out before it was half over—and there was to be ices. I asked him, and he said there was to be ices.”

They all liked Mr. Frank. He might go to tea at Myrtle Villa whenever he cared to do so.

“A very gentlemanly young fellow,” said papa. “More so than his friend—what was his name?—who introduced him to us.”

In or out of his duck trousers, in hot weather or cool weather, papa was quite the gentleman. He had begun life with a large estate and a handsome income; he had been in a crack regiment; he had enjoyed the friendship of great people; but now, nothing whatever seemed to be left of these splendours except the duck trousers and some faded photographs. Mr. Frank, sitting at tea with the family, was conscious of something vague and hazy in his host—a man detached from realities, a man in the clouds, a man who never would ask troublesome questions.

“They tell me,” said Captain Morgan, “that you spoil those two boys;” and he looked at the little fellows as though they were any one's boys but his. “Thank you, Ethel, dear. Yes, I would like another cup. . . . Are you a whist-player?”

No?" and he smiled. "Have you considered the risk you are running? You are preparing for yourself a sad old age."

Mr. Frank could play whist well enough, but he was too wise to say so. He much preferred walking outside the club with Ethel to playing cards inside the club with papa.

Because he was going to-morrow, he was most particular that Ethel should promise to walk with him and talk with him on this, his last evening. But, unexpectedly, Ethel refused.

"I can't to-night. I have an engagement. I meant to tell you."

"Can't you get out of the engagement? What is the engagement?"

"I am going to the Hippodrome."

"Oh I say, what rot. Who with?"

"I shan't tell you, if you ask like that."

Then he was angry and rude—talking about "asses," of being chucked for any ass who would take her to a circus, etc.; and Ethel very properly flashed defiance at him.

"Who are you going with?"

"I shan't say. You have no right to inquire."

Poor Ethel—she always came back to that.

Deserted thus on his very last evening, he marched about the town in a lordly, angry fashion—smoking a big cigar, and ready to quarrel with anybody—saying "where the devil are you coming to, sir?" and all that sort of thing, if any one did so much as to brush his arm in the crowd at the bottom of Harbour Street. He was just as angry as angry can be, because Ethel had deprived him of his last evening's amusement.

At half-past ten he was swaggering through the crowd by the Hippodrome as the delighted audience came out into the narrow street. He thought he might see truant Ethel, and, affecting not to see her, walk past her with his hat on his head and his cigar in his mouth. If her cavalier was that grinning ass who wore the I.Z. ribbon, they would certainly be in the most expensive seats: so he looked for Ethel in the throng coming from the stalls. But it happened that Ethel had been

with two cavaliers to the cheaper seats at the top of the great building. She came down the stone staircase hand in hand with her double escort. Her pretty face was flushed, and her kind eyes were bright with happiness—the best of all happiness : the sort that springs from giving happiness to others. She had saved up her money to cheer her two little brothers with this great treat. It was *their* last evening also : Dick and Raleigh were going back to school to-morrow.

“Yes,” she told Mr. Frank. “And *you* might have come too. I was going to ask you—because—because Raleigh wanted you. Only you were so horrid and unkind——”

Then his heart melted. He threw away his cigar and dropped his haughty manner. He took them all three into a gaslit shop and bought sherbet and almond rock for the little boys, and iced coffee and a box of chocolates for her.

He walked home with them as slowly as he could make them walk, because he wanted to be with her as long as he possibly could. He felt that—although it was eleven o’clock—he could not part with her. And at the door of Myrtle Villa he told her so.

“Ethel. Come for one turn with me.”

The household had gone to bed ; the house was dark ; a grumbling sleepy servant, who had opened the door, was waiting to close it again.

“Oh no,” said Ethel. “I can’t keep Eliza up any longer—and, besides—I don’t think mother would like it.”

It was strange to hear the invalid spoken of thus as a force. Here in the shadow outside the dark house, it was pretty to hear the hidden yet presiding home-spirit invoked thus unexpectedly ; but he continued to plead.

“Ethel. My last night—just one walk in the moonlight on the pier.”

Then Dick and Raleigh both offered to sit up for Ethel.

“Eliza can go to bed,” said Raleigh. “You won’t be long. We’ll let you in. Go with him, Ethel—because he *is* such a brick.”

"You're a brick too," said Frank; and he took Ethel's hand and led her away.

"Very well—one turn," said Ethel.

Hand in hand they went down the stone steps to the deserted pier. At the foot of the steps it was all mystery and darkness: black shadows thrown from high walls of warehouse and sheds, greyness and vagueness in which one could scarcely see the capstans, chains, and coils of rope. But beyond the shadows, the stone pavement stretched away clear and bright to the very end of the pier.

He guided her very carefully, with his arm round her waist, through all the shadows; and, when they came out into the moonlight and were standing by the granite parapet to watch the moonbeams on the water, he took her in both his arms and kissed her again and again.

"Don't," said Ethel in a whisper.

"But I am going to-morrow;" and he held her fast. "Why not?"

"You know very well—you have no right." She would come back to that. "You know it's wrong," and she began to cry. "Besides—it is unkind to want to make me fond of you, when you don't really care for me."

Then he nearly said something rash—something that he might have regretted saying, later on. But he pulled himself together—just in time. His arms dropped away; he stepped back a pace; and he said, most lamely and tamely—

"Ethel—what a little dear you are. What a dear kind girl—so good to her brothers——"

"Not good—if I keep them out of their beds," said Ethel with a sob. And then, drying her eyes: "Come. Let me go back now."

They walked home to the sleeping house, side by side; but with no guarding arm for her—not even linked fingers. The little boys were waiting in the doorway; and Mr. Frank, after fumbling in his waistcoat pocket, gave each a tip to get tuck with at school.

"Crikey," said little Raleigh, feeling his tip in the darkness. "It's a sovereign—I believe. Do you really mean it?"

Such largesse took the breath away from both little boys, and their sister was quite overwhelmed.

In the darkness she turned towards their generous friend and held up her face to be kissed. The soft cheek was wet and cold, and the warm lips, when he found them, were trembling.

"Good-bye," whispered Ethel.

He went to London next day, and in the train invisible strings seemed to be drawing him back to Greypoint. He was thinking of the girl and of her family. The father was a gentleman—you could not doubt it: she was a thoroughly good girl—he was quite sure of that. There was absolutely nothing against her. A sweet and happy girl by nature, with now and then that touch of sadness in her thoughts which comes from wide-extending sympathy. How good and kind she was to the little school brats, Raleigh and Dick; and how they loved her. And he thought of her going in and out of her mother's darkened room, before and after every walk on pier or sands. She never forgot to report herself.

His beggarly income—of ten or eleven hundred a year—would seem wealth beyond the dreams of avarice to this sea-side family. The family would all welcome him with open arms. They two could live somewhere by the sea—in a pretty red house with white wood-work and striped sun blinds; and through the open windows, in every month of the year, the fresh sea wind would blow health to their tanned faces. He would play golf all day—good sea-side golf, and she should have a little pony cart and drive out and talk to him between two rounds. In a few years she would bring with her little sun-burnt children, in white bonnets or straw hats, to have tea with dada at the links for the first time in their young lives. As he thought of it, those invisible strings seemed to tighten round his heart and to draw him back. It was as though,

plainly, now, Fate was making him a definite offer, at a fixed price. And he was thinking if he should pay the price or refuse the offer.

It would mean the surrender of freedom, of the power to go or to stay as the fancy of the moment prompted. No more to lounge at ease in his fine London club; no more running about the continent with bachelor pals; no more cautiously indulged bachelor dissipation—no more sport: a few days' racing, hunting on hireling hunters, shooting other men's birds, making light love to other men's wives and daughters. No more dinner-parties, no more country-house visits—he was popular and had many friends. No more *amusement* of any sort or kind—that is what it meant in plain words. But he was nearer thirty than twenty-five—had not he enjoyed enough amusement? Might not happiness be a fair exchange for pleasure?

He had no troublesome relatives to interfere with him. The rich uncle down in Hampshire, whose partridges were calling him, was a jolly old bachelor who would not care a snuff of a candle. Four, five, possibly six thousand a year had old uncle Jack—with no one to make use of his money after him, unless it was nephew Frank. It would be a pity to huff the old boy—but there was no risk of that. He would not care a tinker's damn whether Frank married or remained single. No risk there. And if the hale and hearty old man did his duty—well then, something better than a cottage near the links and a governess cart in the years that were coming.

The train carried him swiftly across the flat brown fields and up the long slopes, through miles of hop gardens, by chalk cuttings and in dark tunnels, and then showed him his last glimpse of the sea—far-off, silver flashing, diamonds sparkling, a glitter and a glory that faded while he looked. But that last glimpse made the strings tighten and drag most painfully—so that his whole heart throbbed and ached.

While the queer sensation continued, he almost made up his mind to go back by the next train—or at any rate to-morrow—and ask Ethel to cut the strings for him, or rearrange them

in such a manner that he might wear them for the rest of his life without pain.

A night or two afterwards he was talking to one of the oldest members in the smoking-room of his fine London club. This was a white-haired, cynical old member who was not greatly beloved.

"Where d'ye say you're going?"

"Germany," said Frank, "when I come back from my uncle's place. I shall stop a few days at Ostend—I like Ostend out of the season—and I mean to have a flutter at the tables—but I don't want to do anything rash."

"Oh, you won't do that," and the old fellow laughed cynically and offensively. "You won't hurt yourself. Your bump of caution reaches halfway round your head."

Mr. Bray marched away to the other end of the room and drank his whisky and soda by himself. He was offended and had seriously thought of reading the white-haired member a lesson. He had been inclined to say: "Look here. Did you mean to be offensive, or are you the sort of old curmudgeon that doesn't understand?" But he did not say it: he only thought about it.

You see, the fact was: as he thought, he knew that the old curmudgeon had told him the truth. He knew that. He knew it best of all when he thought of the long jolly letter which he had written that morning—to Ethel.

. . . "I look forward to coming back next year, and to finding you all flourishing. Please send my regards to Raleigh and to Dick." . . .

It was all very jolly, but it was "Good-bye, Ethel." He could not pay the price.

II

He did not go to Greypoint next year, or the year after. He heard no more of his Greypoint friends, and he never wrote

to ask for news. He was abroad—travelling with his oldest pal—when again he was reminded of them.

“Frank. You know when we were at Greyport—— Well, do you remember that rather jolly girl—Ethel Morgan? . . . I hear her father’s dead. I wonder what on earth they’ll do now. They hadn’t a penny among them.”

Thinking of it for a little while, he understood what had happened. He knew the world. He, standing sheltered and secure, had often observed the effect of storm. The cruel tide of life had swept over Myrtle Villa and utterly submerged it. This sea-side family had gone under or were feebly, though desperately, battling in the waves. Rough luck!

Travelling abroad, lounging at home, seeking amusement wherever chance pointed a guiding finger, Mr. Bray grew slowly older.

He was thirty-three, thirty-four, and amusement was becoming harder to find. The zest was going out of things. He spent much time down in Hampshire with his uncle, who had now definitely promised to make him heir to wood and field, house and barn, stocks and shares, and all else that Death renders useless to its owner. Lazily walking round the estate and thinking that ere very long it would be his, he languidly wondered what he would do with it. He was only sure of one thing. He would sack Mrs. Bryant, the housekeeper. She was presuming, if not impudent.

One autumn he was passing through London, with unsettled plans, at a loose end, waiting for a letter from a pal, and compelled to stay for a few nights at his rooms in Jermyn Street. His club was closed for repairs, and the members were quartered on a horrid, new, bankrupt kind of establishment that also called itself a club; he was without friends, totally deprived of amusement; it was the hot dead time of the year when London is absolutely hateful.

He never saw a soul he knew, until one evening on an omnibus he saw Ethel.

He was almost sure the moment he saw her, and he jumped

at the footboard, clambered up the lurching staircase, and sat down on the seat behind her—in order to make quite sure.

She was on the front seat of all, stooping forward, and talking to the driver in a friendly, easy fashion. At the sound of her voice, he knew he had made no mistake.

“Ethel!”

“*Frank!*”

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“I am going for a ride—as far as the ’bus goes—for fresh air.”

“May I come with you?”

“It is a public vehicle,” said Ethel, smiling. “Come with me—if you are not too proud—to ride with a shop-girl. I have to work for my living now, you know. I am in Pryce Brothers—Dryden Street—just out of Oxford Street. Say you have heard of it. It’s the coming shop.”

She had flushed faintly when she spoke of herself as a shop-girl, and then had spoken of the shop bravely and defiantly, as though ashamed of the blush.

She was dressed in black, and she seemed taller and thinner than as he remembered her. She was neat and trim as of old, but to his eye her frock was shabby from long wear, and the black gloves that she carried in her white hands were painfully shabby. Those sunburn-gloves of hers had vanished for ever. The sun-burnt face had become strangely pale, and the blue eyes seemed less bright but much larger.

Yet pale Ethel was as pretty—in another sort of way—as brown Ethel. As he sat on the jolting seat beside her, base thoughts as well as kind thoughts passed through his mind. He was thinking of the effects of storm, of the struggle with cruel forces, of the temptations of a shop-girl’s life. Pretty, lonely shop-girls who ride on ’buses sometimes look for chance companions to aid them in the struggle.

But very soon, at the sound of her voice as she talked to him, at the sight of the worn gloves as she twisted them in her fingers, such ugly thoughts ceased to present themselves. She

was of course completely virtuous. His heart melted as she told her story.

The cruel wave had rolled over all. It is always horrible to hear of—though one knows the sort of thing so well. Mother dead. Sister Harriet, a governess in Russia—but often ill—threatened with the loss of eyesight. “She worked her eyes too hard—after the death of my father.” The small brothers at a charitable institution—masonic schools.

“My father was a freemason, you know, and his father was Grand Provincial Something—anyhow, the biggest mason in South Wales, so they got them both in—first Dick, then Raleigh. Poor little chaps,” and Ethel suddenly began to blow her nose and sniff.

Brother Bill—and here came a gleam of light—was doing well, with a useful wife, and land and beasts of his own now. But it was still a hard, hard fight for poor old Bill.

“That,” said Mr. Bray sympathetically, “was the one who was in Australia.”

“No,” said Ethel. “That was David. We never heard from him. We—we think he must be dead;” and Ethel sniffed again.

He went with her as far as the omnibus would carry them—to Liverpool Street Station. Then they got on another ’bus and came west again. The lamps were lit now; the last red and purple had gone out of the sky; all was greyness and mystery beyond the range of the street lamps. The air was fresher; and, as he sat very close beside her, it seemed that the ’bus was carrying them back into the past. The years were slipping from him: the sweet sea-breeze was fanning his face; she was the happy but defiant Ethel of the old days. He made her leave the ’bus and have dinner or supper with him, in the grill-room of one of the big hotels at Charing Cross.

“Very well,” said Ethel. “I live in; but it’s all right if I’m back by eleven o’clock.”

He gave her cutlets and peas, and a jam omelette. He made her drink champagne and eat peaches and grapes—not

because she wanted them, but because champagne and dessert are expensive and he wished to give her a real treat as a reward for saving him from a dull evening.

The rare wine caused her to prattle freely ; and, while she prattled, he sat smoking, and watching the mirth and the sadness show alternately in her soft, large eyes. She was a brave Ethel—she made nothing of her own troubles.

"You'd laugh if I told you all the things I tried to turn my hand to—and the fight I had to get into a really good shop."

"I hope people were kind to you."

"Kind !" and Ethel laughed. "What a funny thing to say. . . . But yes," and in a moment her eyes and all her bright face became sadly serious. "Yes—I have met with great kindness. I owe everything to kindness."

Then she related how she had found a kind friend in a brother-assistant at her first shop—a horrid cheap draper's near Clapham Junction. The friend knew his work inside out and upside down ; and he had helped, had shielded and watched over the clumsy novice. She owed all her success to this Mr. George Carter.

"When he went to Pryce Brothers, he waited till he felt his feet under him and then got me in. He's used all his influence ; and the more they have valued him, the more he has pushed me along. Would you like to know what I am ? . . . Well, I'm second in the Mantle department. I draw my fifty pounds a year," said Ethel, proudly. "Not bad, that—in three years."

She was proud of Pryce Brothers, and she told him again it was the coming shop. Every year they lifted their trade to a higher plane—dropping more and more of the cheap *Fancy* and striking out more boldly for the high-priced *Regular*. *The Mantles* was already first-class : drawing carriage-customers and never losing them. More and more carriages came every week out of Oxford Street into their quiet side-street.

"When we get our corner," said Ethel, "we shall fairly boom."

Then she told him about the old china shop at the corner—in Oxford Street. This was a little fort that must fall before greatness could be assured. It was the key of the strategical position. It would give Pryce Brothers the one thing now needful—the cachet of the address. Oxford Street! But Gordons, the china people, established 1750, were almost driving the brothers Pryce out of their minds. Their trade was dead; they sold no china; the fly-blown dusty stock was unchanged from year's end to year's end; and yet they would not part with the shop. They had ample means, and they seemed to cling to their shop because from long association they would feel lonely without it.

“George—I mean Mr. Carter—believes they are only holding out to make a market. We shall get it in the long run, though we may have to pay through the nose for it.”

Mr. Bray stayed on in hot, dull, empty London and gave Ethel many little treats. Her company made him feel quite young again. Once or twice he saw Pryce Brothers pull down their big iron shutters for the night over their six big doors. There was a queer little door left open in one of the shutters, and through this Pryce Brothers' young ladies soon came tripping in search of fresh air after their long day's work.

Male assistants came out also, stooping, then pulling themselves together, and drawing a deep breath before they stamped away. They seemed to glare at Mr. Bray sauntering to and fro between Gordons' at the corner and the little door, as if they had been guards of a well-conducted harem, and he had been a swaggering, intruding bashi-bazouk.

One, a well-built, resolute-looking guard, glared at Mr. Bray, but spoke to him with the urbane manner of the shop-walker.

“Can I do anything for you, sir?”

“No, thank you,” said Mr. Bray.

“Are you waiting for Miss Morgan?”

"Yes, I am."

"Well, she'll be out directly," and the man turned abruptly on his heel and stamped off.

Walking with Ethel at the Earl's Court Exhibition, looking at her in the soft light of all those pretty little glowworm lamps, sitting close by her side and listening to the music of the band, Mr. Bray thought now and then that the girl was something of a magician. She had rolled away the stupid years for him; she had given him back the past—they were not really at Earl's Court; they were at Greypoint, on the east cliff; that was the sound of the waves, not the rattle of a train on the District Railway: he could feel the clean sea-breeze upon his forehead.

"Ethel," he said one night, "it is jolly being together again, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "it is jolly—— But——"

Then she told him that she was engaged to marry the shop-walker.

"Oh, Ethel! How can you?"

"Yes, I know he is not a gentleman. But he is such a good sort. When we're married, I'm going to improve him. He knows his defects."

And she spoke loyally and defiantly, and yet very sadly, in praise of Mr. Carter. He was buyer now as well as shop-walker—drawing his two-fifty a year—trusted, respected, liked by all. He could start in business himself any day, because of the high opinion in which he was held by friends at the wholesale houses—who would put down solid money, as well as giving him long credits, whenever he chose to ask them. Or Pryce Brothers might be forced to take him into partnership. They'd find themselves in the wrong box if they lost him, etc.

"Anyhow," said Ethel, "he will make a home for me—somewhere for Raleigh and Dick to come to. And—and—what chance have I now of ever doing better? Do you know I am twenty-seven?"

"You don't look it."

"Don't I? You only say that out of politeness," and she brought out her handkerchief and blew her nose.

Then, after one or two sniffs, she told him that, in spite of its being very jolly, she would not come out with him again. She had enjoyed it all, and was very grateful, but it only "unsettled" her.

"But you must come to-morrow—at least."

"Oh," said Ethel, with sudden weariness as well as sadness in her kind voice—"oh, what *is* the good of it? And—besides, you can't suppose that George likes it."

Of course Mr. Carter did not like it. He wrote to Mr. Bray to say so. He wrote very respectfully, saying in effect: "I appeal to you to leave the girl alone, and not to unsettle her." In the letter he asked if he might come and call upon Mr. Bray; and, receiving no answer, he came.

It was in the evening. Mr. Bray had just returned to his rooms and was changing his jacket.

"This," said Mr. Bray to himself, "means a scrap, before I pitch him downstairs;" and he came from the bedroom to the sitting-room in his shirt-sleeves.

As he expected, it was the man who had spoken to him outside the shop. Rapidly taking stock of the man, he thought there would be plenty of good old-fashioned give and take before the visitor consented to go downstairs with a boot behind him. He was, however, so angry that he was all eagerness to begin his task.

But Mr. Carter had not come to fight. He was extraordinarily respectful while he again made his appeal to Mr. Bray "as a gentleman." He appeared to possess a deep-rooted admiration for gentlemen and a complete confidence in gentlemen's ethics.

"She's the best girl that ever lived," said Mr. Carter. "I know that well enough;" and then, for the only time during the interview, he spoke violently. "By God—if I thought any one meant mischief to her——"

"Look here. If you want to make a noise, you'll just go outside into the street and make it there——"

Mr. Carter apologized for his noisiness.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I only meant to say I trust her implicitly. I didn't mean anything else. You—you must make allowances—sir. I'm not a gentleman—like you, but I hope I'm a man—and I've my feelings—same as if I'd been to Eton and Oxford."

Then, at some length, he described his feelings. They were deep and strong and true, and Mr. Bray, listening, was forced to confess to himself that such feelings would not have disgraced a gentleman.

"There. I've said my say ;" and Mr. Carter took up his hat and fingered the brim of it. "She has told me all about you. . . . I understand she was fond of you—once. . . . Now, if you are going to ask her to marry you, I must stand down. . . . I can't give her what you can."

And once again it seemed to Mr. Francis Bray that Fate was making him a definite offer at a fixed price—the same price to pay for something less than was offered last time. And again he refused to pay the price.

"Look here"—he had fetched his jacket from the bedroom and was slipping it on—"you—you are a good fellow—Mr. Carter. I'll go away from London. I—I won't see her again. I—I won't come between you."

III

HE was older now—old enough to feel old man's twinges or sentiment—the first sting of vain regret—the discomfort that men don't like confessing even to themselves. Such pangs took him unexpectedly—on an empty stomach, or after a good lunch at his club—anywhere.

A club-member, younger than himself, had called him over to the visitors' portion of the coffee-room to see a schoolboy of fourteen eating game pie.

"My eldest ! That's the sort of customer that makes you feel old, Frank—but makes you feel young too. Carries one back—to one's own youth."

"Oh ah, yes—to be sure," said Frank Bray ; and he went into the club-library and sat on a leather sofa and thought.

Which was it really—this sense of discomfort ? Indigestion or vain regret ?

He was older than that young lout's father. He was forty, nearly forty-one ; and in these last four or five years the zest had gone out of nearly all things. Few things excited him now ; scarcely anything amused him ; nothing made him really angry. His uncle had chucked him over ; and, honestly, he did not much mind. His uncle had married Mrs. Bryant, the housekeeper ; and the blushing bride—her blushes began years ago by the kitchen fire and were now permanent—had brought the hale and hearty old man a bouncing boy, and then a bouncing girl. Honestly, Frank Bray did not mind.

His thousand a year was more than he could spend.

Sitting on the leather couch, he thought of something he had once read in a book. The writer declared that it is men, and not women, who suffer most when they brood upon vanished youth. He thought again of what his friend had said just now about youth—carrying one back, etc.

Friends of one's vanished youth ! And he thought of Ethel. She was the last person who had carried him back.

Ethel is married—— He sent her a present before the wedding. And now he sat thinking of Ethel. What have the years done for her ? With children ? Prosperous ?

And suddenly he thought he would like to find out all about her ; that he must seek her out, hunt for her till he had found her, touched her hand, made her speak for a few minutes of the days when he and she were young.

She had not prospered.

There was great difficulty in finding her. No difficulty in finding Pryce Brothers. The great shop seemed to come to

meet him—right round the corner into Oxford Street. Outside, not a trace left of Gordons, “china and glass, established 1750;” and within, as he walked from department to department, not a memory left of Ethel Gordon or Mr. George Carter. Pryce Brothers sent him into the city to the wholesale houses to obtain tidings of Mr. Carter. He might get the husband’s address there, and thus get at the wife.

He found her after a three days’ hunt. She was working at a cheap shop in Buckland Street, Chelsea.

She has not prospered. Her husband’s health has failed. He is at a hospital by the sea. For a year and more she has been the only bread-winner. There had been one child, a little girl—who died. “She was—just—three,” and Ethel used her handkerchief.

“Ethel. I am so sorry for you—”

She has changed, but grief and the years have given her dignity. She is pale, but the sweet brave eyes have a wonderful expression as she speaks of her husband. “Poor dear. He is a little better. The doctors say he is really a little better since we got him to the sea.”

She speaks of her family, with an effort; but smiles for the first time as she tells of Bill’s success. The other two boys have gone out to him. He is the father of a happy brood. David went under completely. They never heard, but are sure that he died years ago. Harriet is blind—in an Austrian convent. “She writes—wonderfully well, quite legibly. She prays for us.”

“Ethel. I want to help you. I have more money than I know what to do with, and——”

“Oh, no,” said Ethel. “It is very good of you. But we couldn’t let you help us—in that way. My husband wouldn’t dream of it. Besides,” she added proudly, “we are not in need. At Ballard’s I am drawing my sixty-five pounds a year—living out, of course.”

He wanted to help her. He refused to part with her unless she would say he might help her. But this was the utmost help

she would accept of him : he might escort her next Sunday to the hospital by the sea.

"Yes. Where is it?"

"Greypport," said Ethel. "You may guess how sad it makes me, going to see him there—of all places in the world."

They went down to Greypport by an early train on Sunday. It was a bright autumn day. The sea was sparkling; the white cliffs flashed in the sunlight. They walked—where they had walked so often—across the brown fields to the hospital and the low terrace above the yellow sands.

The invalid was lying on a deck-chair—among other doomed ones—warmly wrapt by Charity, basking in the sunlight, drinking-in the pure sea air.

"I have brought an old friend with me," said Ethel.

"Mr. Bray? How very kind—of you," and the invalid, raising himself, began to cough.

He was woefully thin—hands especially. His beard looked strong and glossy; and, above the beard, the narrowed face was of a good colour, tanned by the sun. His eyes were extraordinarily bright.

"I am much better, dear," he said to his wife; and then, moving to take her hand, had a dreadful fit of coughing. The least movement made him cough.

"Don't you mind, dear. I promise you I'm better—the doctor says so. I've done fine this last week."

He was full of hope. About him, on either side, the doomed ones lay stretched on carrying-beds and deck-chairs: all cheerful, smiling—all hoping.

Mr. Bray stayed and talked for a few minutes, and then left husband and wife together. He would return and fetch Mrs. Carter in the afternoon, and escort her to her home in London.

"That's very kind of you, sir."

He looked back at the end of the terrace, and saw them hand-in-hand. She had already forgotten the existence of her escort; she was thinking only of her invalid. Mr. Bray

put his hands in his pockets, walked down the stone steps, and strolled along the sands towards the harbour. He walked to and fro in deep thought. He was thinking of her in youth, of her long brave fight—of his own wasted empty life.

He returned to the hospital again at the appointed hour, and in almost unbroken silence they went back to London together.

He could read in her face that nearly all her hope was gone.

"Ethel," he said at parting, "when may I see you again? Let me see you soon."

"No. Please don't come again. Don't come to the shop again."

"Let me come when the shop closes. Let me give you dinner somewhere——"

"No. Please—I would rather not. Don't you understand? I am very unhappy. I would rather not see any one—while he is so ill."

But he felt that he could not keep away from her. One morning, as he walked down Pall Mall, he felt that he must go straight to the shop and see her, hold her hand for a moment, hear her voice, and tell her that he could not sleep at night because she refused to let him help her.

They would have barely started business at the shop; he would not be disturbing her; he felt that he must go at once.

Then, as the hailed hansom came towards him, he thought of the man in the deck-chair, of the thin hands, of those bright questioning eyes; and, of a sudden, he changed his mind.

"Where to?" asked the cabman.

"Victoria Station——"

"Mr. Bray?" and the sick man looked up in surprise. "This is very kind of you, sir. But—has Ethel sent you? Any bad news?"

"Oh no. Ethel is hard at work—and I thought—as she could not come herself—I would run down and see how you are. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" said the man. "It's the kindest thing I ever heard of;" and he began to cough.

Mr. Bray sat by the deck-chair for two or three hours, talking to the man, listening to the man.

"You've done me good, sir. It's nice enough here, but I've no company except my own thoughts most of the time. Tell my wife I'm really better. Will you be seeing her?"

"No," said Mr. Bray. "I shall be writing to her."

In the pleasant autumn weather Mr. Bray went down to Greypoint again and yet again.

"You didn't tell my wife you had come to see me."

"No. I thought, afterwards, that you would be sure to write to her——"

In fact, Mr. Carter had reported these visits, and Mr. Bray had received a letter of thanks from Chelsea.

"My heart," Mrs. Carter wrote, "is too full to thank you properly, but I am very, very grateful.—ETHEL."

The man was weak as a little child. He was nothing in one's arms. It stabbed one with pity to lift the light weight from the chair to the bed. But the man was full of hope still. He lay blinking at the sunlight, talking of the past, talking of the future, and his feeble voice was broken, he was shaken almost to pieces by the horrible cough; and yet still he hoped.

Between the coughing fits he told Mr. Bray of all his life.

"It was the sense of failure that pulled me down, sir—more than the illness itself. They say marriage makes a man bold. . . . I don't know. It made me a coward. . . . Ought to have started in business on my own. The time had come—but I didn't dare take the risk—for her sake. . . .

"Never mind. I'm not afraid to begin again. I'll get back to work—— I've bought my experience. They can't rob me of *that*. I'll make a home for her again."

It was painful to hear. These doomed ones all think they will recover.

"I shall be right enough, sir. All I want is a year's rest—without worrying thoughts. If I could have a sea voyage, I'd come back as strong as a lion."

Then Mr. Bray begged the man to take his sea voyage without care for the cost. He told of how he could not sleep at night because of his longing to help them. He prayed that they would use his useless money. The man's eyes glittered, his hands shook, while he listened. He was longing for aid, but he would not accept it.

"I can't. It isn't as if you were a relation of my wife's—a chance acquaintance."

"An old friend."

"My wife was fond of you—once."

"Never mind your wife. It is *you* I want to help. Take it as you would from a pal."

"No—sir. You're very good—but you and I can't be pals."

"Why not?"

"To begin with—you're a gentleman. And—and—my wife——"

The cough stopped the man's voice. Soon he lay exhausted—sweat on his forehead, a glitter in his eyes.

"You mean," said Mr. Bray. "You think there is some unworthy thought in my mind"—and the man nodded—"You think that I admire your wife"—and the man nodded again. So weak—a child hanging on a grown-up's word—longing for aid. "You think—— On my honour you may trust me."

"May I?"

"Yes. So help me God, I'll not try to betray you."

And Mr. Bray took the hot, frail hand that was stretched towards him, and clasped it firmly.

It was easier for the sick man henceforth—in his preparation for the long voyage. He was happy, and free from all care.

"I'll want a thick coat to lay in on deck—till I'm up and about. I'll want plenty of books for wet days. I'll want my old writing-desk, Ethel. Don't forget, dear."

He talked in this manner to the very end. He was full of hope to the last.

Ethel Carter was about to leave England. A year had dragged by. She was going to America—to join her brother Bill on the ranche, and to see her brothers Dick and Raleigh; and Mr. Francis Bray was begging her not to go. He was praying her to marry him.

"Oh, my dear," said Ethel wearily. "What have I left that I can give you? All that is best of me is dead. Most of my heart lies buried—with my child and my husband."

But he pleaded desperately for all that was left.

"Give me yourself—just yourself—what's left;" and he gasped in his passionate entreaty. "Ethel. It is what he would have wished—to know you were safe—guarded—loved. . . . Ethel. For mercy's sake say yes. . . . Ethel, it's life or death with me now. . . . I—I can't live without you."

"Very well," said Ethel sadly.

And she gave him all that remained; and, because of his great love, she made him almost happy—and that was much more than he deserved.

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